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Mountains in the Deep

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SENIOR THESIS APPROVAL

This Honors thesis entitled

“Mountains in the Deep ”

written by

Andy Strauss

and submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for completion of
the Carl Goodson Honors Program
meets the criteria for acceptance
and has been approved by the undersigned readers.

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MOUNTAINS IN THE DEEP

By: Andy Strauss

When Evan, prince of the Fourth Quadrant, sees a vision of a ghost-like crown hovering over his father's head, he is sent on a dangerous mission to face the mystical shadow beast ravaging his kingdom—the same beast that has marked him as its prey and that will stop at nothing to hunt him down.

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*For Dad,
My Mountain in the Deep*

Chapter 1: Legend of the Shadow-Blank

“Deep in the desert wastelands of the East,
Where melting trees bow before the pale sun’s gaze,
Where the bones of guiltless creatures cry out,
The Shadow-Blank bubbles and oozes its gnarly head.
Deep under shriveled rocks and cliff decay,
Beyond forgotten delves and crusty cobwebs,
Where legend forbids even the brave explore,
The Shadow-Blank gurgles and growls its ugly oaths.
But deep down the midnight caverns of the peeling beast,
Where the condemned go to coalesce with darkness,
Where storied lives contort from epic to inkstain,
A child holds hope that light will come again.”

“As mentioned previously, this epic poem was written by Liam, prophet of the East, shortly before the fall of the golden age. Now. What would you say this means, Evan? And what would you say is its impact on the First Quadrant?”

Evan, thirteen-year-old prince of the Fourth Quadrant, was sitting cross-legged and falling asleep in his hands. It was his birthday, and the last thing he wanted to be doing was lessons.

“Evan, are you sleeping during lessons?”

Evan felt a pebble bounce off his forehead, and his eyes flickered. Yes, he was definitely sleeping. But who could blame him? He had heard this lesson hundreds of times, and yet his old mentor, wrinkled and mostly hidden by a long silver beard, frequently insisted on reviewing lessons about the other quadrants.

Though his head had been deep in his hands, and he had begun to drool, Evan turned his hand into a fist and tried to make it look like he had been deep in thought the whole time, rather than deep in sleep. His sleepy red eyes betrayed him.

“Could you repeat the question?”

Zeito laughed and tapped his staff—a tall one, carved with a phoenix wrapping around the body. At its pinnacle, the staff held the brightest white gem Evan had ever seen. As Zeito turned to lean on the cobble wall circling the balcony of his tower, Evan grabbed the potted pine sapling that sat next to him. It was barely two feet tall, but the vibrant needles and strong bark showed healthy satisfaction in the tree. The color of the sapling’s needles comforted him, matching the color of his mother’s jade ring that hung about his neck. His mother always loved the trees.

Nothing made Evan prouder than this little tree. As a gift, Zeito had given him a single pine seed he had taken from a pine cone in the castle garden—as a way to remember his mother. So Evan worked hard, learning the best climates and caretaking methods to grow the tree. He had nurtured it all the way to this point, just as his mother used to do. Sometimes his mind would drift away during lessons, and he would dream of great pine forests all grown from the seeds of this very tree.

“These lessons,” Zeito began again, “are important, Evan. A knowledge of our history, the history of Gehatan and the people who live in it, is part of your heritage. On your birthday, it’s especially important to embrace these teachings. Consider them my gift to you. Metaphorically.”

“But do we have to cover all these lessons about the other quadrants? All the other students just have to learn about the Fourth Quadrant.”

“Learning only about the place you live in,” Zeito said, “is not enough to become culturally versatile.”

“What if I don’t care to be culturally versatile? No one ever leaves the Fourth quadrant.”

“You never know who you’ll meet in a lifetime. Let’s continue.”

Evan laid on his back and sighed. He pointed up, closed one eye, and traced the gentle curves of the clouds. They seemed greyer than normal, and were gathering. With his other hand, he held his mother’s ring.

“Perhaps you don’t see it now, but remembering is essential to hope. Remembering our past shows us how much we have grown. Remembering our

legacies gives us drive and reason to keep going. And, Evan,” he said, “Remembering your mother helps us remember what she stood for—justice, and peace. Truly, without hope, we become like . . . well.” Zeito trailed off and rubbed his temples.

“Like my father,” said Evan.

“That’s not what I was going to say—”

“It’s fine.”

“Your father is a worthy man with great potential. He’s just . . . misguided.”

“You can call a teenager misguided, but not a king.”

“I still have hope he’ll come around. And you should too.” Zeito stroked his beard thoughtfully. “Consider this a lesson in faith—hope without promise of reward.”

“Does everything have to be a lesson with you?”

Zeito went quiet and his bushy eyebrows furrowed worriedly.

“I’m sorry. I just want my father to come back.”

Zeito said nothing.

Evan watched him stand there with his hands behind his back, watching the trees on the horizon sway as the wind wandered by. Evan stood and, walking over to his tutor, leaned against the cobble railing and faced the evening sun.

This truly was his favorite spot in the Fourth Quadrant. It was the highest point he knew over the kingdom—the balcony at the top of the center spire. You could see for miles. Though Evan had only been outside the castle grounds a few times in his life, he enjoyed imagining what it was like, out there on the horizon, far beyond the mountains to the west and across the misty waters of the Nebo Kalim. And what it might be like, to the East, a touch of sand turned blue in atmospheric haze.

“What is a Shadow-Blank?” asked Evan.

“It’s a fictional creature, of course. Some scholars argue that its existence is—”

“Do you think it’s real?”

Zeito chuckled. "Of course not. It's just a legend. Myth. Metaphorical." Then he paused, looking intently at Evan. "But if it were real . . . legends paint the beast as compassionless and remorseless. Strong and filled with an ugly kind of fire. Something not to be trifled with. Some say its power is essentially unmatched. But know this: there are powers greater even than the Shadow-Blank. Powers much more good."

Both went silent.

Suddenly there was a great pounding on the doors to his tutor's balcony. "What's this about?" Zeito asked.

"Pardon, sir," said the servant, coming out onto the balcony. "But the King wants to see the Prince. He's waiting for you . . . in the throne room."

Evan tried not to look shocked. His father rarely called for him. He was always rushing hurriedly about, as if whatever he was doing held the world together. Evan sometimes tried to talk to his father, when he saw him passing through the halls, but most of the time his father kept walking like he hadn't heard his son speak. If he received any notice, it was hardly a glance—a gruff look, as if he had tripped over the stone that was his son.

Evan glanced at his little pine tree that his father had never seen. Perhaps if he saw the way he had cared for it for weeks, then maybe his Father might at last be proud, or at least take some sort of interest in him.

Evan swallowed. The King wanted to see *him*. Not his tutor, not anyone else.

Him.

Chapter 1: Shadow Crown

Evan stopped before he entered the throne room. His heart was racing. He worried about what his father might have to tell him. Best case scenario, Evan's father merely wanted to wish him a happy birthday, but otherwise, who knows what his father might have in store for him.

When he entered the room holding his sapling, a chill ran up Evan's spine. The room felt cold and untouched, though there was a blazing fire near the throne. A sort of cloud hung over the area, and Evan dreaded entering any further. He felt like he needed to hug the tree he held—shield it from the coldness.

And there he was. His father, Alder the Second, High King of the Fourth Quadrant, poised on his throne. But as soon as Evan saw his father, something stopped him from taking two more steps into the room—something that Evan had never seen before.

Above the King's head was a crown. But it wasn't the King's typical golden crown that surprised Evan.

There was a second crown, and this one hovered above the King's head like a black rain cloud. The crown seemed to shimmer in the light and faded in and out of Evan's sight, flowing about, like a watery mist. Looming ominously there in the air, the crown boasted features that seemed to mock King Alder's crown. Its spires were taller and sharper, and its brim wider. Evan shook himself and determined not to mention it, but to ask Zeito later. He couldn't risk looking any more like a fool than he usually felt in his father's presence.

"Ah, Evan," began the King, motioning for some of the servants to leave them in peace. "Come closer, boy." Evan moved closer and bowed.

Then he stood before the King. Alder watched him silently, looking him up and down. But he lingered on the plant.

"What's that you have, son?"

Evan held out his plant for his father to see. "It's a pine sapling. I nurtured it myself. See how big it's grown?"

“What are you doing growing plants? Haven’t you been studying with your tutor?”

“Well, yes sir, but I tend to my tree in my free time.”

“Have you not been practicing your swordsmanship, or riding your horse?”

“Yes sir, I have. But, father. . .” Evan’s voice trailed off.

“Speak your mind, boy. Stop mumbling.”

“I was wondering if instead of focusing my training on swordsmanship and learning about battles, I could have Zeito teach me more about gardening, and peacekeeping, and the law. I don’t want to be a soldier.”

Alder scoffed. “Diplomacy is a ruse, son. You know that. There is no order without the sword. Who is putting this nonsense in your head?”

“No one, father.”

“Well, I have a gift for you.” King Alder stood up from his throne, and a servant handed him a long heavy package, fastened with a leather strap. He pulled the object out. A sword.

King Alder looked at Evan blankly and dropped the sword to the ground, letting it clatter loudly down the steps to land in front of Evan’s feet.

“But since you have no desire to know the sword and embrace your heritage—no desire to be a King really, you can do whatever you want with it. Throw it away. Give it to some beggar outside the gates. I don’t care.”

“Thank you for the gift. I’ll learn the ways of the sword, if that’s what you want.”

“What does it matter what I want? It all flies away like mist. Evanescence.”

“But may I still learn to tend to my plant and to take care of the garden?”

King Alder lifted his chin and walked down marble steps so that he stood before Evan. Evan looked up at this man, breathing heavily, glaring down at him, and wished that his father—his real father—would return. He summoned up the last bit of courage he had and straightened his shoulders, but kept his eyes calm and compassionate.

“You weren’t always so angry, father,” Evan said softly. “And distant.”

Alder shook his head and pursed his lips. “Just like everyone else in this miserable world, you don’t know your place. You will learn what it means to be King. It means sacrificing the things you love most.” Then he grabbed the plant from Evan’s hand.

“Gardening,” he said, “is beneath a prince. It is for the slaves and the servants. And it is the last thing on a King’s mind.”

“But mother loved to—”

“Silence.” For a moment they stared at each other, and Evan watched the misty crown shimmer above his father’s head. At last, Evan lowered his gaze.

With that, King Alder took the tree by its tiny trunk and snapped it in half. He tossed it carelessly into the fire.

“See how quickly life fades away,” he said, and paused, watching the bark burn. “Let go of it all. You must.”

Evan watched his tree curl up and die in the flames. When he looked in his father’s eyes, he saw nothing but an empty coldness.

Silently, Alder pointed to the door—Evan’s sign to leave. Dolefully, he picked up the sword meant for someone twice his size. The crackling of his tree echoed throughout the throne room.

As Evan walked out the great doors leading back to safety, back to comfort, where he could be with Zeito in peace, his father called out,

“Happy birthday, son.”

Chapter 3: Vision and Light

Evan walked back into Zeito's study, in the room at the highest point of the tallest castle spire, holding back tears. He wiped at his eyes, not wanting anyone else to think him weak.

After some time of painfully relating his encounter with his father, Evan watched old man Zeito stroke his beard, patting him on the back. He led him to the balcony and gave him a cup of tea. There they stood, safe in each other's company, watching the sun set over the dusty western mountain ranges.

"There's something else, Zeito."

His friendly tutor turned attentively, and smiled.

"When I went into the throne room, I saw my father and I noticed there was a little bit of darkness over his head."

"Metaphorical darkness?"

"No. When I came up to the throne, I realized that the darkness was a sort of cloud of mist hovering over his head. And it was in the shape of a crown."

Zeito shifted suddenly and his eyes flickered. "A crown?" he said.

"Yes, a crown. One much larger than his and much sharper."

"Sharper?"

"Yes, that's what I said."

They both went silent for a moment, Zeito muttering to himself.

Then a small blue bird landed near Zeito. It was a quiet bird, and for a moment it seemed to join them as they watched the sun set.

Maybe it was the argument with his father, the sudden urgency he saw in Zeito's eyes, or the silent assurance of the orange sun hovering over the hills, but Evan felt something in his soul start to move, as if a decaying, cobweb-ridden gear had shifted a click and begun to move again inside him. It made him nervous.

Evan looked over at Zeito. His eyes were closed, and he leaned closer to the bird.

Suddenly, Zeito seemed to wake. He opened his eyes and, focusing on Evan, shone bright as fire.

“Evan,” Zeito said as the little bird flew off, “it’s time for a journey.” He walked briskly about the balcony, stacking books in his arms. Then he began to scramble, moving faster with each moment. He paused and saw Evan standing there like a stone statue, confused.

“This is no metaphorical journey!” said Zeito.

“Wait, right now? Where are we going?”

“Grab your cloak. All will be revealed in time.” Zeito grabbed Evan with his free arm and pulled him through the balcony doors and into his study. He let all but one of the books in his arm crash to the ground with no regard for their protection. Now Evan’s heart was pounding. What was going on? Normally, Zeito treated his books with as much care as he would have a baby. He might as well tuck them in each night, the way he dusted them off with greatest delicacy.

“I can have Simon prepare a couple horses,” Evan said.

“No need,” Zeito said. He flung open the door to the stairs that led down the spire. Before descending, he spun around and his long hair danced.

“Quickly!” he barked.

Evan had been staring in awe at his usually slow, weary tutor, who looked suddenly taller, suddenly braver, bouldering around his study, leaving the place in a mess. Standing now in a pile of papers and books, Evan jumped at Zeito’s order and rushed down the spiral staircase after him.

It was dusk and getting darker. Evan struggled to keep up. The old man was sprinting now, his cloak rippling behind him like a cape, his momentum casting him against walls as he tried to turn tight corners. He had never seen someone run so fast.

They sprinted down hallways and past confused servants. Torches cast shadows that galloped beneath them, and Zeito never stopped for breath.

“Wait, Zeito!” Evan called. “Shouldn’t we pack?”

“Sorry! No time.”

They burst outside, where servants and staff were beginning to light lanterns about the courtyard. Everyone turned to stare at the wild-haired man who once resembled a tutor. He whistled lightly, and out of nowhere came a black and white pinto, strong and lean.

Zeito took Evan by the shoulders.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “I’ve not been honest about who I am. But I’ve been given important instructions.”

“What?”

“In the least metaphorical sense, I have to go. Listen carefully. There is something new that’s swelling up inside of you. Have you felt it?”

Without knowing why, Evan nodded.

“Evan, you have seen the shadow crown. You have been chosen for a great purpose—A destiny interwoven with the fates of the four kingdoms.”

“Me?”

“What you have seen has been foretold. You must trust what I say, and follow my instructions exactly.”

“But—”

“Listen. There is a family who live at a farm a day’s ride north. But you’ll have to go through the Silent Woods. Ride quickly. They’ll be waiting for you on the other side.”

“The Silent Woods? No one ever comes out of there!”

“Find the stone, and more importantly, watch for the dreamer. His fate is as critical as yours.”

“I don’t know if my father would—”

“Evan, you saw the shadow crown over your father’s head, yes?”

Evan nodded.

“Hm. Then my final instruction—the most crucial—is this. Once you have found the dreamer, you must hunt down and destroy the source of the shadow. Be brave, Evan. You must first face the Silent Woods. There is both good and bad in those woods, and you will deal with both.”

“Why can’t I come with you?”

“I have my own mission to complete. I’m sending you now on yours.”

Evan said nothing. He mounted the horse.

“Don’t drink any water that comes from man or sky. But let Celeriter here guide you, and watch for the blue bird with fire on its chest—the Kingfisher bird. It will give you what you need.”

With that, he passed Evan a lantern and reached in. He pinched the dull, unlit wick of the candle, closed his eyes, and murmured quietly. Before Evan realized what was happening, the old man sent Evan and the horse sprinting forward into the black night. Evan glanced back to see a blur of Zeito leaping onto a horse and racing the other way.

He was alone.

He had nothing with him but the clothes he wore, the jade ring, and a lantern burning brightly in the darkness.

Chapter 4: Thieves in the Night

Evan leaned forward and practically held his breath as Celeriter sprinted into the sludgy darkness. The beat of the horse's hoofs could barely be heard—Celeriter practically flew down the path as if he were an arrow shot across the land. His hooves thrummed. He leaned into the wind.

With his left hand Evan held the ring hanging from his neck and with his right he held the reins. Celeriter guided him: a left here, and a right there, weaving down the dirt path farther into the forest. With each turn Celeriter lost no momentum; in fact he seemed to gain speed.

Then it began to rain. At first it was gentle, but showers of rain soon fell and drenched the earth. Evan pulled on the hood of his cloak, but it didn't help much; the treetops didn't seem to provide much protection either. Thunder rolled through the hills, echoing in Evan's ears. Though the path was nearly impossible to see, dull blue lightning flashed frequently over the forest treetops, illuminating the way. Still, the wet earth, the mud, the gray chaos would not deter the strong horse or slow his pace or resolve.

It was only about ten minutes of riding in the dark, but the pounding rain made it feel like hours. Evan's tongue stuck to the roof of his mouth.

He was thirsty.

The water dripped off the rim of his cloak and fell gently over Celeriter's back. It would be so easy to reach out and cup his hands and drink some of the water. But Zeito had said not to drink *any* water from man or sky.

Evan lifted up his right hand and felt the cool rain on his palm. It looked and felt like normal water. He stared longingly at the waterfalls of rain pouring out in every direction but he shook the rainwater from his hand and the desire from his mind.

With that, the rain seemed to fade, though the thunder continued throwing its threats into the empty night. At last, the trees seemed to provide some shelter from the rain.

Celeriter slowed to a trot for the first time since they had left the castle and steadied. Evan noticed his ears perked up and his head fixed on something on the road in the haze.

A massive tree had fallen into the road, almost as tall as Celeriter. Evan dismounted, and splashed into a pool of muddy water. The light rain fell and resounded through the forest like lulling, eerie chimes. Evan approached the tree, and Celeriter whinnied, as if in warning.

Now that Evan was near the tree, he could see in the haze that something seemed unusual. The bark seemed grayer than most trees. He reached out and felt the miniature mountain ranges made up in the bark of the gigantic tree. It felt wet, and loose. He tugged at a piece sticking out. The bark peeled, and tore off as easily as if he had been taking the skin off an old orange. The trunk underneath the bark was black.

Evan walked down the length of the trunk towards the roots, drawing a quick breath. Almost to the bottom of the tree, there were three marks as tall as he was, scratched into the base.

The marks cut deep. They were thick and abrasive.

Evan tried to remember from his lessons what kind of creatures lived in these woods, but he couldn't recall anything large enough to make marks like that.

Could they have been made by some man? But that didn't explain the sickness in the tree, which seemed to originate from the marks, and it was not what had knocked the tree down. Evan walked farther.

Below the scratch marks, clear ax marks could be seen. Someone had used the weakness of the disease in the great tree to cut it down.

In the distance, Celeriter neighed. Evan jumped up and ran through the dead leaves to the road. When he came upon the clearing, he sighed in relief to see Celeriter standing there, unharmed. Celeriter stamped his foot and snorted. Maybe he had just been spooked by some small animal trying to cross the road.

Then out of the shadows, Evan saw a blur. He heard a rustle.

In an instant, Evan was knocked to the ground. Four men fell out of the trees to join the one who had snuck up on him. Evan lay in the mud and watched three of the men struggle to tie Celeriter to the great tree.

“Little far from home, aren’t we?” said a voice from among the men. Out of the shadows walked a scrawny boy, with the hints of a beard growing around his jaw. His clothes were ragged, worn and re-worn over weeks of hot, grueling days in the sun. His hair was matted and long.

“I have to admit,” he said, emerging from the group, club in hand, “I didn’t expect to find you lurking about in the Silent Woods. Or even outside castle walls. What are you doing out here, prince?”

“Wait, you’ve come to the castle before. You’re that merchant always trying to scam us into some deal.”

“Of course that’s all you think of me. If you paid any attention you’d know there’s real stuff happening out here. Are you even aware of the famine? Of the people going missing? Too cushy at the castle to think of the starving people?”

One of the burly men gave Callen a rough shove.

“Are we gonna loot or have a family reunion in the rain?”

Callen nodded. “Check the satchel on the horse.”

The burly man chuckled. “Must be some sort of evil in that thing, the way it thrashes. Callen, search your squeaky little brother.”

“He’s not my brother. Just a runt I know from the castle.”

The rough men ran past Evan, splashing mud in his face.

Callen bent down over Evan. “Look, I know you. So I’ll make this easy on you.” He reached out and rubbed a bit of mud off the ring hanging from Evan’s neck. “How about we just take this pretty little ring, and I’ll convince these guys to let you go. They’re not always in such a good mood.” Callen glanced up at the other men, emptying out the satchel on Celeriter. They weren’t finding much.

“This was my mother’s ring,” Evan said.

Callen grabbed Evan by the collar. He drew close to Evan’s face. Evan could feel his breath, and he saw the heat in his storming eyes. Callen sighed.

“Evan, I know. You’re a spoiled prince. You shouldn’t be out here in the first place. Now play along and stop trying to play hero.” Evan’s face lit up.

“You’ll give my ring back?”

“Sure, whatever. Look, these people . . . they’re all just farmers, starving like my family. We’re all just trying to make ends meet. Maybe don’t tell anyone about this—back at the castle, ok? I don’t wanna lose my reputation.”

“How do I know I can trust you?”

“What choice do you have? Plus, I’m trying to get out of a bit of a bind myself, so you’d really be helping me out.”

Evan nodded eagerly.

“Stop. Don’t look so excited. You ever see someone excited to get robbed? Maybe whimper a bit. Or cry. Yeah, cry. That’ll do it. Something less ‘prince-y’ would do nicely.”

Evan let out a loud, facetious groan, but Callen quickly put his hand over his mouth.

“Too much,” he said. Callen threw Evan back down again and kicked him in the side. Now Evan moaned softly.

“Just right,” he said. Tearing the ring off Evan’s neck, he called out for the others and laughing, they all ran off into the woods, leaving Evan bruised and alone in the Silent Woods.

Chapter 5: Silence and Sound

It had finally stopped raining, but it would take hours for the mud to harden and the moisture to evaporate. Overwatered leaves dropped their extra share down to the soil, and onto Evan.

The world was quiet for a moment. Evan lay and listened to the natural forest ambience.

It was still very dark. The gang had broken Evan's lantern. Now he would have to either travel by the light of the fading crescent moon, or find a place in these thief-infested woods to camp for the night.

Evan stood and went to untie Celeriter. Something sank in his heart when he saw the bruised horse leaning over a pool of rainwater gathered in the mud and drinking long, desperate drafts. With the nonstop running and the thrashing at the hands of the robbers, the horse needed water. But he hadn't understood Zeito's instructions like Evan had.

Evan jumped forward and jerked Celeriter's reins, pulling the horse away. He had no idea why Zeito had warned about the rainwater. Perhaps whatever danger there was only affected humans. Or maybe there was no danger at all and this was all one elaborate test of Evan's obedience. Knowing Zeito, he knew this wasn't out of the question.

"Celeriter, friend," Evan said, patting the horse's head tenderly. "We can't drink the rainwater. I'm thirsty too—Let's keep moving."

After careful navigating through the trees, Evan led Celeriter around the great tree back to the main road. He mounted, but the horse did not have the same energy that he'd had before.

It was late. Evan's eyes began to droop, and his head began to nod until he fell asleep across the horse's back.

Evan woke and felt his heart rush when he realized he had fallen asleep. He tried to force his eyes to be alert.

Nothing that he could see felt out of the ordinary. But the blackness of the woods made Evan shudder. It wasn't what he could see that frightened him, but the things that might be creeping just beyond the trees in the dark.

Then he noticed Celeriter was not himself. He was not trotting anymore. Just walking. Slowly. The pace was barely faster than if Evan walked the path himself.

And the poor horse's head hung low, as if he were barely keeping himself awake.

Evan dismounted, and the thump seemed to echo into the unknown regions of the woods. Then he grabbed the reins and walked before Celeriter, guiding him.

"Come, friend. Not too much farther now. We just need to find somewhere safe to camp."

They spent an hour, trudging slowly through the mud, slowly through the darkness. Wolves howled in the distance, and at every moment Evan felt like they were getting closer. With each rustle or twig-snap off the road, Evan winced, but they kept walking.

At last, Celeriter stopped. The horse's head had sunk almost to the ground, his long hair nearly dipping into the mud. Evan tugged on the reins, but the horse stood still and let out an exhausted puff.

Evan turned around to face the road, and looked out into the haze. For all he knew, they could still be miles away from any sort of civilization. The calls and cries, rustles and snaps began to build around him. They grew louder in his ears. Evan's heart beat faster. He turned back to Celeriter to see that the tired horse had lain down in the middle of the road.

Evan took a breath. He sat by his horse, leaning up against him. He had no idea what the rest of the night would bring.

Chapter 6: Power and Purpose

THE THIRD QUADRANT: DARIAN'S FORTRESS

The sun had set, having gathered up its light to give to other realms. Yet far off in the west, the velvet grass twisted in the questioning wind. It stood tall and crooked, growing unnaturally as it did in those lands. The trees shivered in the blackness; no creature made a sound. And even in the dark, a great shadow loomed over the exhausted earth, cast by the stony-cold castle of the King of the Third Quadrant. Surrounded by sharp, teeth-like mountains, the castle judged the outerlands from a distance, all while basking in its own gold-lined spires and jewel-studded doors. Every touch of green in that place that clung to the warped lifeforce lurking within it leaning to hear the icy conversations within its walls.

"The Fourth Quadrant is starving," said Zander, prince of the Third. "If we offer them even a portion of our wealth, the king will happily give up his throne. They have no other options. But you wouldn't give up a single diamond if it meant you could have the world."

"Son, just enjoy the day," said his father, smacking on a bite of black eel. "It is not fitting for a prince to worry before a big campaign. And on his sixteenth birthday, no less!"

"My birthday was three months ago."

"No, I'm pretty sure it's today. Or was it yesterday?"

Zander sat across from his father, the King, and sickened at the sight of the food that had been prepared—rich roasted stag, piles of exotic fruits, and loaves of warm, salted bread. But his blood boiled when he looked into his father's eyes. They were wide open, but distant under his heavy brows, like they were searching for something far, far away—far beyond the lush mountains, past the horizon and across the misty seas of the Nebo Kalim.

A banging echoed into the hall where Zander and his father ate alone, soon accompanied by a soft moaning that seemed to leak like black vapor from the edges of the doors.

The two guards at the door shifted uneasily.

“A toast to my son,” said King Darian, ignoring the banging. “I feast alone with you as my father did for me, a symbol that my wealth will be your authority. You are sixteen and soon to be coronated. May you grow to become a powerful leader and a merciless King.” He laughed.

“You’re not going to answer the door?” Zander said. He rubbed his temples. His head pounded, and the banging on the door wasn’t making it any better.

King Darian sipped his wine. “You take the time to worry about the peasant folk, but you won’t thank your father, a king, for his blessing? If you are to be king you must learn to be thankful.”

The room was silent for a moment. The banging came again.

“Minstrels,” said King Darian. “Music—something joyful . . . and loud. Go ahead, son. Enjoy the food I have provided for you.”

The music began, but though the melodies were joyful, the singing of the instruments sounded to Zander like they were forced—stiff. And the musicians looked tired.

This cursed campaign! Zander burned on the inside. Nothing he could do, or anyone else for that matter, could force his father to change his mind when he wanted something. It was the Fourth Quadrant he wanted this time, the last of the sectors in Gehatan, and the first to show any sign of weakness. The first to die.

The farming kingdom of the Fourth Quadrant had been reduced to irony, once full of riches and all of the finest silver and gold, yet now struggling fiercely to survive a famine. Father saw their weakness as his opportunity—his chance to add to his already more than abundant wealth. Zander wished he could convince his father to try negotiating. But that would never happen. The King had long since forbidden trade with the other three kingdoms. Maybe he had done it out of spite. Probably just to flaunt the wealth he had that the others didn’t. Either way, King Darian was set on conquering the Fourth Quadrant, and he was sending Zander to do it.

But Zander saw too often the glimmer of self-satisfaction in his father's eyes. He hated to think that his first campaign could be ruined by ambition. The man whose silvering beard suggested wisdom placed the weight of his glory on Zander's back.

"Today was supposed to be my coronation day," said Zander. His father laughed again.

"Supposed to! You show the people you worry, so they think you are not ready to be king. A king is a figure. He is a picture to the world of the state of the kingdom. You're worthless in their eyes until you've become a conqueror. You have yet to prove yourself in war."

"There haven't been any wars for me to prove myself in!"

"Then we create one."

"No one has done anything to provoke a war."

"They exist."

"The other quadrants are minding their own business. They won't engage in a war. The Fourth especially is focused on surviving the famine."

"Perhaps you need reminding that one's struggles are not for everyone to share." He waved a leg of meat in the air and ate eagerly. Zander felt his heart race.

"I don't care about them. I just don't see why attacking them is the most efficient way to gain their land. Why—"

"Fool of a son!" shouted King Darian suddenly, mouth full. "You know nothing of politics. Of power. You know no wisdom. I *could* give them what I have, but I can't. People don't understand compassion. Only force. Only pain. Give them freedom, and they'll think they can rebel. A nation is not conquered if you leave its conscience alive."

The King lifted up his scepter, an intricately carved gold staff with a massive blood-red ruby at the top. "Or, perhaps you forget this, the guardian of our kingdom?"

"I haven't forgotten. But you put too much faith in that stupid stone."

King Darian's eyes woke from their dullness in a blaze. "This ruby belonged to my father and his father before him. How dare you doubt it! They once used it to commune with the spirits, and so have I done to seek the Spirit's counsel. Our wealth comes from the Spirit! That wealth is what wakes the sun up in the morning. It's what the people believe in. If I have none, I am nothing. You are nothing—the worth of waste and wasted worth."

Nothing stirred. The King's cheeks were flushed now. He glared down the length of the table at his son. The guards held their breath. The minstrels had stopped playing. The silence felt like needles on his skin. A small door opened and closed, echoing in the quiet room. There was a young boy, who skittered towards King Darian and kneeled.

"M-my Lord," he stuttered. "There's a terrifying man knocking at the door who won't go away. His mouth . . . it's—"

"Silence!" yelled King Darian. "How dare you interrupt my meal with my son. Guards! Give him to the machine. It's hungry."

"Wait—" cried the boy, "No, please! I was just—"

"Oh, well, since you said please."

The boy silenced.

King Darian spoke softly. "Boy, I'm sure you would do anything for me—lay your life down in battle for me? Give all of your possessions to me. Yes?"

The boy trembled. He nodded.

"Good. So serve me, then. Feed my machine." The guards grabbed the boy's arms, and the boy began to weep.

"Never," King Darian yelled, his face turning red, "interrupt me when I'm speaking to my son!"

Zander stared down at his loaded plate. He couldn't look at the boy as he was dragged from the room. He tried to quiet his breathing. Even from his seat at the far end of the table, he could see his father clenching his jaw. The minstrels resumed their play, though uneasily.

Then the banging came again to haunt the Halls of the Castle of the Third, but it grew louder and stronger.

In a rupture of noise, the doors of the great hall burst open, flung back like pages in a book. A blinding light swept through the room.

There was a man at the door, dressed in white clothes sparkling like snow. But his robes were charred, burnt by some great fire, and his long silver beard was singed. He leaned forward, limping heavily into the room, and relying wearily on the phoenix-shaped staff he carried, which clacked on the cobbled floor. He stopped in the doorway. His eyes seemed to be looking everywhere and nowhere. Most surprising was the bright gold light that covered his mouth, forcing Zander to look into his eyes. They were deep and somber eyes that cried into the firelight.

Through the doors of the castle, through the weeds, beyond the mountains, over the farmlands, and up to the horizon, clouds began to swirl in the dusk. Their pink hair twirled with the wind and slithered across the sky, joining together in a great dance—an ominous dance.

The wind wisped through the doors and flung the weeping cripple's hair about his face. His eyes searched the room frantically.

Finally, his eyes rested on Zander. Tears left streak marks through the dirt on his face. Zander's heart pounded. Questions tumbled through his mind.

The mysterious man's silent, raspy breath could be heard throughout the hall.

"A message," he said, "from the King."

"What King?" King Darian said, rising. "I am the King, and I forbid any message from Innrick. Or Alder. And absolutely nothing from Nash."

"A message," repeated the man, "from *the King*." And he stared deep into Zander's eyes.

King Darian lifted his hand, and signaled his guards to move forward. They approached the old man nervously. But the closer they got, the weaker they became, until at last their knees gave out, and the knights clattered to the floor.

The man with the glowing mouth looked around the room, but directed the message at King Darian.

"Beware the Power lost by Greed."

Beware the Dragon in the rain.
Beware the Fire to purge your sins.
Prince and bird bring madness's chains."

Chapter 7: The Kingfisher's Call

The minutes dragged by. There was no way Evan could sleep with all the sounds, and being so exposed on the road. He shifted, feeling the roughness of the road and the bruise in his side. Celeriter was breathing, but unmoving. Evan moved to a more comfortable position, to try and sleep through the night, but he heard a crackling in the brush across from him.

Evan kept still, and held his breath. A little bird popped out of the brush. A blue bird, with an orange and red chest that looked like fire. It was the bird Zeito said to look for—the Kingfisher.

For a moment, the bird watched Evan, who had sat up, happy to see a bit of color amid the dreary woods. Then the bird trilled—The Kingfisher's song.

Evan inhaled. Celeriter had lifted up his head and was staring intently at the bird. He snorted.

The Kingfisher lifted off the ground and landed behind Evan's head on the horse's back. Almost instantly, Evan felt Celeriter shift and rise to his feet.

Evan stood, amazed at the renewed energy in the horse. He watched as the Kingfisher zipped off into the woods.

Celeriter snorted.

"Wait," he called to the bird. His voice echoed.

Then he remembered Zeito's instructions to trust the blue bird he would see with fire on its chest. But the bird had flown off into the stifling darkness. Something inside him, however, urged him to follow.

So, Evan, with his whole body and mind fighting the idea of going off the path, entered the dark haze amidst the trees. He could hardly see anything now. But he could hear, and he could feel. He held on tight to Celeriter's reins, guiding him. The beckoning trill of the Kingfisher confirmed their direction.

The darkness was overwhelming. Black twigs and sharp brush ambushed him every moment. He tried not to doubt Zeito, but he was beginning to think his tutor had gone crazy after all, or perhaps he was the one who had gone crazy, imagining things in the darkness. Something must have finally snapped in him

that could not be repaired. Something that made him race away on urgent imaginary missions and chase after little birds.

Evan cried a little in that darkness. Though he was less than a day's ride from the castle, he felt far from home. Things had changed so suddenly. He wished that none of this had happened—that he could go back to laughing with his tutor in the study, and watching the sunset each night from the tower. And the lessons. For maybe the first time, he missed his lessons. He missed Zeito.

All those worries melted away when he found himself stepping through an opening in a thick grove of trees and brush that blocked the light. They came upon a clearing, where there were no trees and the sky was bright and large. A pale moon illuminated the area and seemed to give space where Evan felt like he could breathe again.

It was quiet in that clearing.

Everything seemed to move in slow motion. Tall grass and vibrant wildflowers danced, filling the area and surrounding the largest tree stump Evan had ever seen. The stump was flat and filled with rings. The Kingfisher stood on it and trilled.

But next to that stump was a pool of fresh water. With ease, Celeriter pulled free from Evan's hold and seemed to dance through the field to the pool. He drank from the water. His tail flicked joyfully. Evan watched in wonder and saw the bruises on the horse's side begin to dissipate.

Both horse and boy enjoyed the comfort of the field and the purity of the pool. Evan drank eagerly and washed the mud off his clothes.

They enjoyed it as long as they were able—what their tired bodies could allow. His weariness was now a happy weariness. He sighed contentedly, at peace.

Soon the bird lifted off the giant stump and flew off, but only for a moment. It came back quickly, like a blur, and dropped something at Evan's feet.

It was a stone. A glossy, midnight stone, with the faint hint of indigo gleaming through.

Evan picked it up and held it. It felt heavy. Was this the stone Zeito told him to find? Why did this little bird have it? He put it in his pocket.

Laying out in the field at last, he looked up to the sky to see the Kingfisher hovering above him. It zipped across the blue depths. The fire on its chest traced lines between the stars. And it almost looked to Evan like at any moment The Kingfisher would perch on the curve of the gentle crescent moon.

Evan had never seen a night sky like this one. The dark blues mixed with quiet violets and smooth lavender. And as The Kingfisher flew, the sky seemed to come closer to Evan, as if the whole galaxy had swirled down to care for him. The Kingfisher's call resounded through the clearing, and Evan, at last, fell into tranquility and the bliss of worryless sleep.

Chapter 8: Murmurings of the Mystic Fool

THE THIRD QUADRANT: BENEATH DARIAN'S FORTRESS

Descending. The thump of the heart of a prison is in the echo of footsteps on the stairs down to darkness. Who will it be?

The prisoner, saying his goodbyes to the light? The prison-keeper, holding his breath so he won't contract the death lurking in the fog down there? The visitor, as Zander was, braving the pools of black in hopes that his questions might be answered.

Now, in that place, where Darian the Conqueror had sent so many people to die, one more prisoner was added—one so very unlike the others. It was the man who had burst into the seemingly-impenetrable, gold-plated fortress of Darian with a brilliant white stone on his staff and a glow over his mouth.

Zander walked slowly down the stairs, thinking carefully what questions he might ask him, wondering who the mystic was, why he had come, and what the prophecy meant. So many questions to ask, but the one puzzle that baffled him the most—the problem that scared him the most—was the very fact that the white-robed man had let himself be imprisoned.

Just hours ago, the power of the man seemed infinite. King Darian's best guards collapsed at his feet. The whole room became entranced by his gaze.

But as soon as he had given that ominous prophecy, the light over his mouth faded, his staff dropped, and he fell to his knees, head hanging low. The guards had grabbed him by the shoulders and dragged him down to Darian's depths.

But was it all a trick?

Was he faking weakness to get access to the depths of the fortress?

Though Zander descended into the darkest part of the castle, fighting all these questions, he would much rather be here than anywhere near his father, who had flown into a deadly rage at the mention of a *King* who might have more authority than him. Five men had been fed to the machine already. Plates

shattered, food scattered everywhere—the usual stuff. Zander wasn't about to get in his way.

“Where is he?” Zander said to the shivering soldier standing guard.

“End of the hall, my Lord. The special cell.”

“We have a special cell?”

The guard swallowed loudly. “Never had to use it till now.”

“Has he said anything?”

“Nothing I can understand. It's all just . . . murmuring.”

“Murmuring?”

“Nonsense, Lord.”

“Hm,” grunted Zander. “Show me.”

The guard's eyes widened. He shook his head tersely.

“Fine. Torch?”

The soldier, shaking, passed him a torch and a set of keys, and Zander moved slowly down the prison halls. The light seemed to struggle to do its job, eating away at the darkness one shadow at a time. The red glow pooled at the floor, shadows dancing with the angry flick of the flames.

It was very quiet. The sound of his footsteps rebounded off the walls.

Zander had never been in the prisons. He assumed his father hadn't either. Though the light was dim, he could see the dust and dirt lining the floors, and the rust peeling off the iron prison bars. He stopped and peered into a cell.

The light tip-toed tentatively in, revealing little more than thick cobwebs, a stain of something on the floor, and a rat, who gave Zander an annoyed look and promptly scurried away.

He continued down the hallway, diving deeper into darkness.

But as he followed the hall, he saw the path take a turn. A white glow peeked around its edges, flickering. Turning down the bend, Zander flinched at the brilliance shining through a thin gap under the door at the end of the hall. The rest of the door was solid, windowless, iron.

As he came up to the door, a simple, gravelly voice began to fill the silence. He leaned close, and though the iron door dampened the sound, he heard faintly the murmurings of the mystic fool.

“Kedha . . . Afenu, word. Pulling away. Shadow overly. Dragon. Kedha . . . Afenu, silence.”

Zander opened the door.

A thin railless bridge stretched across an open chasm—completely black except for the flickering white light. Pacing back and forth in the pit below was the crazy prophet himself, still murmuring:

“Kedha . . . Afenu, word. Pulling away. Far away. Shadow overly. Dragon. Kedha . . . Afenu, silence.”

Zander took a deep breath. “What do you want with us?” he asked.

“Kedha . . . Afenu . . .”

“What are you planning to do?”

“Pulling away . . . Far away . . .”

“Who are you?”

“Dragon . . . Silence . . .”

“Answer me, fool!”

The old man stopped murmuring, and he stopped pacing. He looked up at Zander, his distant eyes becoming suddenly focused. “Your father is a prideful man, Zander.”

“Who are you?”

“He has brought what’s coming on himself.”

“Brought what?”

“The silence speaks where kingsongs reek, and the old is taken by what’s new.”

“I don’t—”

“Mountains dream when gold fires gleam, and the crooked mistakes the fresh dew.”

“Stop speaking in riddles! Give me something to bring back to my father. He wants to know what you’re doing here, and whether or not you’re a threat.”

“You are chosen, Zander. Tread carefully.”

“What do you mean, chosen? Chosen by whom?”

Then the eyes of the old man unfocused again, seeming to stare into infinite galaxies beyond.

“What do you mean, chosen?”

“Kedha . . . Afenu, word. Pulling away. So far away. Dreamers. Dragon. Death. Shadow . . . Afenu . . . madness.”

* * *

When Zander came back again, his father was not there. No one was there. He was greeted only by the broken dishes and decaying food scattered about the room. But the doors to the great hall were still open, and a soft breeze drifted eerily through the doors, catching the fabric of the white tablecloth, caressing it as it swayed.

Through the doors he saw his father.

He was squatting just outside the doors, on the edge of the huge staircase that stepped down into the overgrown forests below. From that point, he could see most of the land of the Third Quadrant. He could even just make out the massive lake that divided the Third Quadrant from the Fourth, and the thick fog that hung over it.

King Darian held his staff in his hands, gripping it as if he had just found a large log and was preparing to cast it into a bonfire. His crown was on the floor next to him.

Zander approached him confidently, stepping loudly so as to alert his father of his presence.

“Father, I spoke to the prisoner—”

Silence.

“The fool is beyond mad,” Zander said. “He’s not a threat.”

Then his father spoke. His voice was low, and as he growled out the words he stood slowly and turned to face his son. At full height, King Darian was much taller than Zander, and he glowered down at him.

“Kill them all,” he said at last. “Kill them all.”

“Who?”

King Darian turned ominously towards the horizon.

“Look at everything I’ve created, son. Do you see it all? This is what I have made—a land filled with riches, born by the power of my might and the glory of my majesty. There are no other true rulers. Every King in the world bows before me. They tremble at my feet in awe of my wealth. My splendor is unmatched.”

There was a pause. Zander held his breath.

“I will not let some prophecy ruin what I have made. Kill them all. The princes . . . Find them. Destroy them. Everything that The princes, the dragons, the birds.”

“Father, what’s there to worry about? When do we ever trust the word of a madman?”

“*That* is no madman.”

“Well, he was speaking of dragons, Father. Dragons don’t exist.”

King Darian’s face filled with red fury. “Find them anyway!”

Zander felt his own face flush with heat, but he bowed.

“Begin with the Fourth. Take a small company. Conquer their heart—Habbardy. And find whatever prince that lives there. He needs to die.”

Chapter 9: Beast of the Blue Mist

When Evan woke, he couldn't quite remember how or when he had remounted Celeriter and started back into the woods. It was morning at last, or at least it seemed to be, for a fresh cool breeze was blowing through the trees. Evan glanced around. The road was nowhere to be seen. All that could be seen were gray trees, fading into shadowy darkness. Celeriter trotted slowly, weaving his way through a natural path amid the black brush.

Despite the dark, there was a new something that seemed to flow about him and shield him from the fear he normally would have felt in such a lonely place. Then, rattling him from his observations of the scenery, Celeriter jerked, ears perked, while increasing his pace rapidly and bounding out of the path and into the thick woods. Evan tugged on the reins, but Celeriter obeyed no instruction. He had to dodge the branches and bristles that threatened to knock him off the horse.

"Celeriter!" Evan said as leaves flew in his mouth. Somehow Celeriter was galloping through the brambles. A cacophony of rustling erupted around him.

At last the great horse stopped. Evan brushed the leaves off his shoulders.

Then Celeriter bent his head down. In the middle of those dank woods, full of mystery and danger, was a little girl with outstretched arms. She was barely even the size of Celeriter's head. It nuzzled against her body. She hugged its head and giggled.

Evan dismounted. "Hey there. Where did you come from?"

The little girl said nothing. Evan wondered how the horse knew to trust this stranger.

"Um, I'm Evan. What's your name?"

The girl stroked Celeriter, and the horse whinnied lightly. Evan tried again.

"What are you doing out here all alone in the woods?"

The girl looked at him for the first time, her pale blue eyes bright and surprisingly solemn. She put a tiny finger to her lips, and said in quiet toddler tones, “Shhh. Monster.”

Then she turned and took off deeper into the woods. Immediately, Celeriter followed the little girl.

“Celeriter, wait!” Evan said, but the horse seemed to have forgotten he existed.

So Evan followed.

Farther and farther into the woods they went. At last, Evan heard someone calling in the distance.

“Aurora!” said the voice, strained and worried.

Evan heard a gasp, and, coming out into a grove, saw the little girl in an embrace with the one who had been calling out into the woods—an older girl, Evan’s age. Maybe a bit older.

“Aurora,” she was saying, softly now. “Please don’t run off like that again. You made me shout in this awful place.” Then she saw Evan with Celeriter, and she glanced at the girl.

“Found him,” said Aurora. She came to Evan and tugged on his hand. Evan pulled away.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “I think you mistook me for someone else.”

“Hello, Evan.” said the older girl. She stood just a few feet away and observed him. Her eyes narrowed and her mouth tightened. She didn’t seem angry—only cautious.

“How do you know my name?”

“Do I have to answer that? You *are* the prince, are you not?”

“I’m just surprised you knew it was me.”

“Quiet! You’re talking too loud. I’ve made enough noise as it is.”

“What do you mean? What’s wrong?”

“Monster,” said the little girl again, and a shadow passed over her sister’s face. Without a word, the girls walked together into the woods, beckoning for Evan to follow.

“Wait, I don’t know you,” said Evan, tripping over a branch.
“I don’t even know your names.”

The older girl’s eyes widened in amazement. She came up close to Evan, her long braid flicking angrily behind her.

“Please! Lower your voice. Have you really never been told why they call this place the Silent Woods? What rock have you been living under?”

The girl’s voice was ominous. Now Evan kept his voice down.

“I thought it was just because it was quiet out here.”

“It’s quiet for a reason,” she said and paused. “You’re being hunted.”

“What!” said Evan loudly, and the girl glared at him. “What’s hunting me?”

“It’s always hunting,” she said, barely audible.

“Monster,” said the little one.

“Why!” said Evan, his heart beginning to race.

“No one knows how it chooses its prey.”

Evan huffed and began to tremble, and under his breath, said, “Why didn’t Zeito send me some protection if he knew this place was so *dangerous*?”

Then, with blinding speed, the braided girl flicked a knife out her pocket, sending it flying through the air like lightning. It stuck in the tree immediately before Evan, and he jumped.

“What was that for!” said Evan. The girl pulled the knife out of the tree and held out her hand to Evan.

“Hello. I’m Azalea, daughter of Farley. Zeito sent me to make sure you don’t die in these woods. This is my sister Aurora. Don’t underestimate her, or me. Saving your questions for *after* we’re out of danger will make my job a lot easier.”

Evan was stunned. But his silence was a moment too late.

From the darkness of the woods, in the silence, there came a faint growling. It was a guttural growl that seemed to trip over itself as it amplified.

He heard Celeriter stomp uncomfortably. Aurora whimpered quietly.

Evan looked around and saw nothing. He couldn’t tell where the sound came from. It seemed to come from every direction.

The darkness pulsed and Evan turned about frantically, trying to find the source of the sound. A coldness came over them, and they shivered together.

He peered into the darkness, and watched as two death-white eyes opened in the dark—pale white orbs like twin moons. They stared at Evan.

“It found us,” said Azalea, lips white. And she ran.

They soon found themselves sprinting through the woods. Evan could only keep up with Azalea because she had slung Aurora on her back like a satchel. He glanced over his shoulder and saw those eyes again. It seemed like the creature wasn’t running to chase them. It stalked them menacingly, as a lion would his prey, knowing without a doubt that it wouldn’t lose.

They came to a clearing, but the trees had thickened, and the grove blocked off any easy exit.

They were trapped. The children turned to face the beast.

“Throw a knife or something,” said Evan desperately.

“The knives are for people! They don’t work on it.”

“Then what’s the point!”

“The point was not to let this thing know we’re here, stupid!”

With a great lunge, the beast charged, bright white eyes wide and intent. Evan closed his eyes.

In the great commotion there was a silence and a rustling of wind and leaves. Then a force like a brick knocked him to the ground. Black. Calm.

He opened his eyes and found himself in the dirt. There was a ringing in his ears, and a numbness in his arms and forehead. The world spun.

He felt too weak to move. And there was . . . that thing, limping now, surrounded in a misty cloud of shadow, but still there, trying to paw its way towards him. Something was on fire. Broken tree limbs and woodchips covered the area. Evan saw the two girls off to the side, eyes closed, unconscious, but the beast stayed low to the ground and focused on him alone.

His skin crawled. Terror gripped his heart.

But in that instant, Evan saw the air above him begin to wobble, and a blue crack split the void. Bright blue light erupted. From the tear left a tall man with

trim silver hair. He landed powerfully, planting himself between the charging beast and the children. Blue fire trailed up the back of his arms. Four sapphire bracelets glowed around his wrists.

There was a flash of blue, and through his mental fog he saw the creature flying over his head. The beast sailed into a massive tree. Evan heard the great crack. Green and blue light erupted again.

At last there was silence. A serpent mist trailed around him and flowed in the darkness of the woods.

“Peace, children,” he heard the tall man say at last, but the words were muffled and distant.

Then a sharp pain quieted his thoughts. In the commotion, the knife-like end of the beast’s tail had caught him. He felt the blood running down from his forehead.

White light filled his vision, and everything became dark.

Chapter 10: Mountains in the Deep

He saw his mother there, swaying steadily with the rhythmic plodding of the camels that pulled their caravan. Something seemed to be calling to her, or whispering to her sweetly, for she closed her eyes blissfully, taking long warm drafts of the desert air—like she was listening. His Father, King Alder, was there too, though watching the busied crowds more carefully. Despite the admittedly impressive cavalry that accompanied them, he noticed his father's brows draw close while observing the hoards of people lining the roads, scrambling at the chance to see the King. His mother, however, unfazed by her husband's concern, seemed to enjoy feeling the wind on her face, and smiling at the people—at the children.

Six-year-old Evan enjoyed watching his mother when she was like this. He liked to try and guess what she was thinking. Was she closing her eyes to keep out the sand? Was she thinking about his Father? Could she be thinking about the journey home?

"Evan," his mother said gleefully. "What do you think of your first adventure? Isn't the world wonderful? Look at all the sand! It's very different from our wooded world, isn't it?"

Evan nodded.

"Wouldn't you like to be a traveler someday, and see all that El Roi has made?"

Evan nodded again.

"And wouldn't you like to see all the kinds of trees, and write them all down, and maybe even find beautiful places and things that no one has ever seen, or perhaps forgotten?"

Evan nodded, but soon became distracted by all the new things to look at, fascinated by anything and everything he could see. The purple velvet carpet in the caravan. The green and blue sky filled with puffy clouds that looked like animals. And all the many kinds of people in their multicolored garments working in the bazaars and watching them from the road. The Queen laughed.

“Yes, Evan, you are almost as curious as me,” then she gave Alder a quick nudge, and a big smile. “And nearly as distractible as your father.”

The King shook from his focus on the road and chuckled.

“What are you hoping to find that your world-renowned cavalry won’t?” she asked him with a gentle smirk. “We’ll be arriving soon at your brother’s palace. You have done more than enough. For now, let’s enjoy each other’s company.”

“Of course,” said Alder, and they laughed. Alder looked off into the flat, sand-ridden wilderness just beyond the town. He took a deep breath and pointed at one of the shops amid the crowd. Just outside was a massive clay pot, ornately decorated, and in that pot was a pine tree.

“Evan,” began his father, “see how that tree leans—how it has lost the leaves that made it once green? Do you know why the good trees are green and always pointing up at the sky?”

Evan shook his head.

“There’s an important tale you should learn, that I know you will understand as you grow older. It’s a story that my father, your grandfather, taught me.” Alder tousled the hair on Evan’s head. “It’s a warning—that as you grow, little prince, that you will use the power given you with humility and respect. I trust that you will.”

Then King Alder began to speak. His voice was deep and calm—the assurance of the tide paired with the depth of the ocean. Evan loved to hear his father’s voice, and this time was no different. As he closed his eyes, and laid his head in his father’s lap, the noisy bazaars, the clattering of barrels, and shouts of merchants drowned out of memory. Nothing was left but the wind and the rumble in his father’s chest as he spoke.

Whom the Green-born kings shall instruct,
Shall be a fitter King than most,
For He who holds heaven’s jewel shall entrust
The earth to one whose heart shall never boast:

One day a king tried to gather clouds in his hands
And build a tower to seal his soul in heaven's dome.
First collecting stones, smoothed clean from lovely waters,
He brought them to his sons and told them all his plans.
He set the stones around and formed them into one—
A place to build his tower to seal his soul in heaven's dome.

Next he sought the earth's clay and molded sturdy bricks.
A circle formed from his work, reaching to the sky.
For thirty years he glued his stones together
And sacrificed his strength to seal up all his honor
Pushing farther, reaching longer, and building
Higher and higher to join the golden clouds in glory.

One day he brought his sons, seven proud and hearty,
And cried, "Look my boys! Look what I have created!
I've built a tower to challenge kings and prove them all
That I am the gatherer—the clouds are my legion!
My soul has been matched to the sky and the sun.
Never question, my heirs, the strength of your father's proud song.

Six of these sons sang of their father's boastful strength
And clapped their witless hands for him, praising at length,
But the youngest of his sons, a boy timid and quiet
Did not join the singing that countered his sight.
"Father," he said, "you have worked for years on this tower—
You built this spire to seal your soul up in the sky;

"You reached up your hands to gather the golden clouds,
But in looking upward for glory's cruel reward
you forgot to look down, observe your foundation."

And as he spoke his mind the weary ground shifted,
For it was pure gravel and sand;
The tower leaned and groaned under the weight of hungry Greed's fell
hand.

Thirty years crumbled in thirty seconds—every stone fell to the dirt.
And the proud king began to wonder what his work had been worth.

King Alder said, "It is the most pleasant thing to have a master when that master is unblemished. A King is blessed to have no need to worry about the grand story of his life, or his kingdom. He has it already planned out. Never worry, son. Only, be thankful."

"Tell it to me again," said Evan, who had just begun to fall asleep.

"Another time," said the King.

At that moment, a man from the crowd in dirty white garments jumped out at the caravan and grabbed at the King's leg. One of the knights on horseback promptly kicked the man in the face, sending him sprawling backward.

"Stay back," he said.

In the back of his mind, Evan knew his father was talking to the knight, his voice stern. But he wasn't paying attention to what he was saying, for his eyes were still heavy with weariness. The old fellow was weeping, his grimy hands wiping at the blood running from his nose. Clumps of his pale beard stuck together as if melted and reformed under the stifling desert sun. Evan felt his tears were not out of anger or frustration, but a pure sort of pain.

Then King Alder dismounted from the caravan despite the many objections coming from his entourage. Evan looked to his mother. Unlike the rest of the company, she brimmed with serenity, and it calmed him. She was watching her husband.

The old man had stopped crying and trembled fiercely now, eyes wide as he watched the King approach him.

Nothing like this had ever happened—or at least, nothing that Evan had ever seen. But his mother looked as if she had seen this sort of thing many times before, like she knew the ending to this strange encounter.

King Alder kneeled and took the elder's right hand in his. Evan watched him as he brought the dirty, bloodstained hand and placed it on his own heart. He was saying something, but Evan couldn't hear, though the old man was crying again. They were deep sobs; he tried to hide his face, and his shoulders shook.

But the King took the man's head in his hands and kissed his bald head.

All this time the constant commotion of the bazaar transformed to an amazed tranquility. The crowds were still, watching.

Evan's mother cried silently with the old man, but she smiled. Then she leaned over to Evan, and whispered in his ear,

“Dear one, your father wears a crown, and it gives him authority over many things and many people, but his true crown is his compassion. This world, our Roth-Kleanne, is in a constant scramble of power and pride, trying to surpass, diminish, and overcome one another, but those who will kneel before the poorest of men and give themselves away for others are our true kings and queens. More than any swordsman, more than any conqueror, they are the ones who are truly powerful. They are the mountains in these deep waters we call our world.”

Chapter 11: Dreams of Distant Lands

SOMEWHERE IN THE WILDS OF THE THIRD QUADRANT

Everything was drenched. Trees hung low, shoes slogged, and every particle of clothing in a hundred-mile radius sagged in a sort of watery depression. It was here, far off in the west where Zander trekked heavily through mud with an entourage of soldiers following him.

If only his father knew that Zander had never wanted to be a soldier in the first place. Even if he *had* figured it out, based on the cloud of gloom that passed over Zander during training, the King still would have sent him. His ravenous desire for land and power and wealth was infamous. In secret, they called him Darian the Hungry, though they would never say it to Zander's face. He was Darian the Conqueror before any kind of man with power.

Zander held his hand up for the entourage to stop. They had reached a dead end. At one point, there had been a road here, but the overgrowth was so extreme that it spread across the path like a disease. The brush seemed to swallow the land whole. His father wasn't the only one who was hungry.

Zander sighed and looked to the sky. The moon peeked through the sky as the sun began to set. He gathered his company and they set up camp.

As Zander lounged by a campfire that night, he rubbed his palms on his temples. Sharp pains had been tormenting him constantly. At least, since the dreams started. Zander had resorted to keeping himself awake at night, as long as possible, to save himself from the dreams.

But tonight, on his first campaign, sleep weighed heavily on him. He struggled to keep himself awake.

At last, weariness dragged him down in chains, and Zander, Prince of the Third, Heir to Darian the Conqueror, dreamed.

* * *

It was the same dream. Every night. It followed him at night, and it followed him during the day.

He dreamed he stood in a wide field, expansive yet surrounded completely by trees. Grass stood tall and long, rippling as if waving hello to the universe. Or goodbye.

Wind rushed through the valley, a sharp knife cutting the field in half. It galloped about Zander and pushed him back a step.

The wind, however, was only an outpouring of something greater. In the center of a field stood a tree like no other Zander had ever seen. The trunk was thick and strong, wider than a castle tower, and ten times taller than any other tree in the area. Its branches spread far and reached out like they were scooping up the stars in their arms.

But despite its great height and strength, still, this tree was no ordinary tree. White fire blazed across the branches and burned in a giant dance of heat and power.

Yet none of the branches were consumed. Anywhere else, the fire would eat up the world by the very nature of its heat. Zander could feel the flames even from far away. As much as this tree terrified Zander, it didn't seem like it wanted to hurt him with its flames. In fact, it was the opposite. He watched as fauna from the woods—deer, rabbits, birds, even predators like wolves and falcons—came to the tree. A scrawny rabbit among the group of animals looked mangled. Its side was bleeding, and it limped slowly towards the tree. The closer it got, the faster its wounds healed. By the time it reached the base of the tree, it seemed to have been completely restored. And not only restored; it had grown twice in size.

In this recurring dream, Zander walked through the plain, closer and closer to the massive tree that burned the black sky and illuminated the world. He felt what he had seen. A deep warmth in his chest rose and comforted him. He came up to the base of the tree, and a new image appeared.

Coming from four different directions, four men approached the tree. They seemed disconnected from the world Zander was in, like ghosts. Zander tried calling out to get their attention and ask what the tree meant, but the four men couldn't see or hear him. Their wispy clothes flowed loosely in the wind, and a faint gray steam trailed behind them.

They advanced further, coming up to the base of the tree, on all four sides. Above each of them appeared crowns with four sharp spikes. But the crowns were made of mist. They hovered over their heads. With the tallest of the four men came a fifth man. This man was clad in black garments. He was very old. Though he stood beneath the tree burning bright with fire and light, an inescapable shadow hung over him.

At this point, the dream flickered, as it always did. Moments of darkness passed between moments of light. There was an agreement among the men. A gathering. And he saw an ax burning with a black kind of fire, given to the tallest of the men by the shadowed elder. He saw the four men acting upon the tree as if the instant they began cutting into the rich bark had been frozen in ice and preserved for him to see.

The dream flashed and suddenly the men were gone. But so was the tree. And so was the warmth. All that was left was a shallow stump and a coldness that made the darkness of the night feel infinite.

* * *

Zander woke sweating, and out of breath. His company was awake and starting to take down camp. A derisive laugh came from above him. It was Wren, his younger brother, who happened to be something of a legend in the Third Quadrant. He never got tired of flaunting his fame to Zander.

“Aw, poor baby have a bad dream again?” he said, and laughed. Zander rolled his eyes.

“I would kill you if we weren’t related.”

“Even if we weren’t, you wouldn’t. Everyone here knows how you feel about killing. You’re not man enough for it.”

“I don’t kill because I usually don’t have to. It’s called discretion, Wren. Heard of it? The only reason I don’t kill *you* is because Father wishes you were his heir and not me. He treats you like a god.”

“What can I say? Our father’s got gilded eyes. Or good taste.”

“I’ll spare you so I can keep seeing that dead jealous look in your eye.”

“I’d suggest you get over yourself soon,” Wren scoffed. “Preferably *before* the ambush rather than *after*. I don’t want to do any saving this campaign.”

“I can handle myself just fine, thanks.” He gave Wren a sarcastic smile.

Suddenly, a couple men from the company rustled their way through the foliage and brought another out with them. Someone that did not belong. The men held him by his arms and dragged him like a wet log. His head hung low.

“Found him watching us from a tree nearby.” The soldiers dropped the man to his knees.

“Who are you? What do you want?” said Zander to the straggler.

The man looked up. His face was grimy, but Zander realized he was much younger than he had thought. The man smiled grimly and chuckled.

“My name is Callen. I have a deal for you, Zander, prince of the Third.”

Chapter 12: Burdens of the Dream-Wielders

Someone was humming gently. It was a slow tune, like a lullaby.

Evan's eyes fluttered. He felt nauseous. Dizzy. And something cold was resting on his forehead, covering his eyes. He reached and found a wet rag, which he promptly pulled off.

The light stung. Shielding his face, he tried sitting up. The humming stopped.

"Look who's awake," said a deep voice. "It got you pretty bad I'd say. I was worried for a moment."

Looking around, Evan noticed the man speaking to him. He was the same tall man from the woods who had jumped out of the rip in the air. There was no fire running up his arms now, but only a bandage on his upper right arm, and the four teal rings around his wrists. He was washing his hands in a bucket of water.

"Gentle now," he said. "Don't stand yet."

Evan felt a sharp headache suddenly. Though the pain in his head made his vision somewhat blurry, he examined the room.

He had woken on a simple cot in a dimly-lit cabin. There was a second cot—empty—across the room. Other than the cabinet that the tall man now fished around in, there was not much else than the bucket, though, on the bed with him lay a plump-looking bear doll with stuffed antlers that looked too large for the bear to hold. It had button eyes that looked very tired. Some of the bear's interiors had lost their original fluffiness and sagged.

He noticed the light came from a fireplace in the corner of the room, which flickered on the cabin walls.

"I'm sorry you got hurt. I was supposed to be there to escort you through the woods, but I got caught up and had to send the girls."

Evan glanced at him and winced.

"It was a mistake. I should have been there. I'm Farley, by the way."

“Where’s Celeriter?” he said and Farley chuckled. His voice reverberated off the cabin walls—a large laugh for his lanky frame. And it was a true laugh—loud and unashamedly so.

“Celeriter’s fine. He spooked and ran off—for good reason—when the beast showed up, but he found his way back. He just needs rest.”

“Good . . . I’m Evan.”

“Yes, believe me,” Farley said, “I know who you are. And if I’m right about what you have that you’re clutching in your hand, I’d say the first part of Zeito’s purpose for me is complete.”

Evan realized then the tight grip in his left hand. He released it, and opened his hand to find the obsidian stone he had been given by the bird in the woods.

Suddenly, darkness passed over Farley’s face, and he turned very serious. “Evan, no one has ever come back from an encounter with the beast in those woods—much less an injury. It seems to have gotten in your blood. Do you realize how long you’ve been out?”

Evan shook his head. The headache was almost gone.

“Long enough. After the incident, you became very cold, like stone. Stiff. Your body nearly froze, and a gray shadow almost overcame you. I did my best to keep you warm, but I don’t think your survival was my doing. In the midst of the storm that came over you, you reached in your pocket and pulled out that stone. It glowed, and the room filled with purple light. I’d ask where you got it, but I have a feeling I know.”

“It was given to me in the woods—by a little bird with fire on its chest.”

“That’s The Kingfisher, alright. Surprising, though—I got my stone at the top of Invictus.”

“Your stone?”

“Well, it’s not just a stone anymore.” Farley shook his wrists, and the four teal bands jingled. “Teal sapphire. It’s good for repelling shadows,” and he winked. “I’ve never seen the Kingfisher give such a dark stone before. What is that, obsidian?”

Evan shrugged and passed it to Farley. Quietly—reverently—the tall man took the stone and observed it carefully.

“Why did Zeito send me here?” Evan asked at last. Eyes still fixed on the stone, Farley stayed quiet for a moment, and then sighed heavily.

“Well,” he said. “The first part is done: for you to receive your gift.” He held up the stone. “I thought step one would take at least a month—probably more like two or three—so I figured I’d come up with a plan for step two when it came around to it. I’ve been scrambling to come up with something—if you actually woke up, that is.”

“Step two? Zeito said he was sending me for new training? I thought Zeito wanted to teach me something secretly—like gardening. What was that magic you did in the woods?”

Farley laughed again, this time harder, and longer. Evan drew his eyebrows together.

“Ah,” he said. “Here come the questions. I am a farmer. But surely you don’t think you’re here to learn how to garden.”

“I thought maybe it was—so my father wouldn’t know. Isn’t this training supposed to be secret?”

“That’s true. But your training has very little to do with plants, and everything to do with this.” Farley set the stone gently in Evan’s hand. “That ‘magic’ you saw was no magic or sleight-of-hand as you might now think of it, like the kind of artificial magic a magician does when he makes something disappear, or even the cheap magic that you might have read about from wizards in your books. But it *was* power. Just the kind you’re not used to seeing. Or, rather, the kind you are so used to seeing that you have forgotten it was always there.”

“What kind of training, then?” asked Evan. Though he felt very lonely, and far away from home, his curiosity had gotten the best of him. He wanted to learn the things Zeito would teach him, and he wasn’t about to leave without following Zeito’s instructions.

“For now,” said Farley. “No more questions. Only this—trust Zeito, and remember the Kingfisher.” Then Farley straightened his shoulders and clapped his hands, with a sort of finality.

“Well,” he said. “The next step is to get to the city and have this stone forged.”

“Can we come!” came a voice from behind the closed door.

“Azalea? No you can’t. It’s too dangerous. And what did I tell you about eavesdropping?”

“Aurora wants to come too.”

“Absolutely not. Evan and I are going, and you two are staying here. That’s final.”

“Is it hard to get into the city?” asked Evan.

“Well, no. Sounds simple enough, I know.” Then Farley sighed. “The only problem is that I’m a wanted man. They’ll be looking for me.”

Chapter 13: Deals in the Overgrowth

Zander drew up close to Callen, the merchant who had claimed he had a deal for the Prince of the Third Quadrant, dangling that jade necklace in his face. He could feel the grime in the breath of the bony servant.

Much taller, Zander glared down at the skinny man.

“In what world did you think this information would be remotely valuable to me?”

“Now is your time to strike! Think of the reward. Think of the prestige. Think of Darian, your father. There’s rumor he doesn’t think very highly of you.” Zander shoved him to the ground.

“You will refer to *my* father as King, or Lord, but nothing else. I don’t have to prove myself to my father. And especially not to you.”

“Yes, yes, of course.”

“Your ‘helpful’ tip is too vague to be worth a beggar’s sandals. No destination? No direction? I don’t think you get how time works. The Prince of the Fourth is likely long gone from the Silent Woods by now.”

“Well . . .”

Zander drew his sword.

“Sorry, but I only answer to one power, and it’s not the blade.” He rubbed his fingers together and smiled like he had found a shiny coin on the ground. Then Wren stepped in, staying Zander’s blade and smirking at him. He drew his own blade.

“The prince is too shy to use his steel,” he said, and with a deft lightning-fast stroke made a tiny cut on Callen’s ear, barely a scratch, but a tiny drop of blood fell from the wound. “But I’m not. I will happily teach you the authority of the blade.”

Callen forced a laugh. “Look, look! You don’t understand. No one escapes the Silent Woods.”

“You said that already,” said Zander.

“When people enter that place, they get lost in themselves, like they’ve been overcome by a curse, melded with the shadows.”

“And you magically stay unaffected?” Wren laughed.

“Me and my guys—we just don’t drink the water. That’s where it gets you. Everyone survives if they drink, but only long enough for them to starve in their own despair. Plus, Evan, the Prince, has only left the castle grounds maybe once or twice.”

“See, baby. That’s how you get information.”

“What does that change?” Zander asked, ignoring Wren.

“He’s vulnerable, stupid!”

“Watch it—”

“Look, he’s probably wandering around in the shadows right now, waiting for someone brave and powerful like you to pick him up. It’s possible, though, he won’t be alive at this point. That could happen . . . so I’m willing to send some guys to protect him—keep him alive and all that. But that’s gonna cost extra.” Callen drew in closer. “I *have* heard the Third Quadrant is known for its generosity.”

“Generosity! My gift to you is that I spare your life!” Someone chuckled in the background. Zander flashed lightning from his eyes at the company. “Anyone have anything else to add?” Everyone was silent. Wren smiled. Callen groveled.

“I only ask,” Callen said, “that if you find him alive, you keep him alive.”

Zander raised an eyebrow.

Callen sighed. “Well, there’s no reason for him to get hurt, I just—”

“But you’re selling him out for money?”

“Look, you don’t know what it’s like down here. We’re all starving, and at this point, a father would sell out his own son if it meant getting something to eat.” Callen then added sardonically, “You might not understand, O Prince of the fertile Third. No food. Drought. Famine. Hungry!” He rubbed his hand on his stomach like a child.

Zander growled. This guy was scrappy. He reminded him of himself, which was annoying. “Fine,” he said through his teeth. “You’ll get your money.”

“Now you’re making deals with peasants?” said Wren. “Can’t wait to tell father.”

Zander felt fire behind his eyes.

“Very good!” Callen said. “And, if you’d like to know about the powerful beast lurking in that awful place, it will only cost—”

Zander tossed the whole lot into Callen’s face. “I think we’ll manage.” Motioning for his company to ready to move, he grabbed Callen by the collar and tossed him towards the road.

“Gather your things, scrapper. We’re headed to the sea. And you’re gonna lead us.”

Chapter 14: The Road to Habbardy

The wagon jostled, and Evan bit his tongue. He was sitting up at the front of Farley's wagon, which carried crates of fresh produce—carrots, heads of lettuce, potatoes and the like, pulled by two horses.

“Not nearly as much as last year,” Farley had said. “The rain, you know. Deadly stuff.”

Evan didn't know, more questions flying around in his head than he felt he could ask. He did ask several questions, attempting to penetrate the quiet outer surface of the farmer, but nothing made it through. The lanky man just sighed.

“Keep your hat on, now,” he said. Evan didn't have a hat. “Crowler will explain it to you. He's been in the business longer than me.”

“Is he the one who's going to train me then?”

“No, I am.” Farley slouched back a little in his seat, slacked on the reins, and picked at his teeth.

Evan was used to studying under people. Over the years, Zeito had sent him to learn from all sorts of strange men and women, trying to teach Evan the “princely duties.” There was Panka the Blacksmith, and Reginald the Weapons Keeper; Jasper the Horse Trainer—Leo the Master Strategist. He had even once learned foreign languages from a Monk with one arm. It wasn't that Evan didn't like any of his teachers—they were all friendly, or at least interesting, people.

But, even though he had sometimes wished for different activities, at least he had known that he could trust the ones teaching him. Panka was boring; Reginald was simple; Jasper was so carefree that there was no way there could be anything diabolical about him.

But Farley was an enigma.

Evan wanted to ask him why he was “a wanted man” in town, but he wasn't sure he wanted the answer. What if Farley was against his father? What if he was a criminal . . . an escaped convict? Or what if it was something worse. Did Zeito know about all this?

Then there was the matter of the events of the forest.

Evan hated to think of that *thing*—the shadowy creature with huge white eyes. It sent chills down his spine, and made his head throb. He felt the scabbed wound on his forehead, where the beast had hit him. It stung, and he winced. He hoped never to see the beast, and he vowed never to go near the Silent Woods again.

This mystery-of-a-man driving the wagon, however, had done things Evan had never seen. How did he appear out of the air like that? What was that blue fire he saw? Maybe it was all just a wild dream, and he was still in the woods. Or better yet, maybe Zeito had read from one of his books a fairy tale about magic and dangerous creatures, and he had fallen asleep next to his old friend's fireplace, with a cup of tea waiting for him when he woke up.

Suddenly, Farley perked up, sitting straight in his seat. His shoulders drew back powerfully, and he became again the man who had leapt from the crack in the air. Then Evan noticed what Farley had seen. They were coming around a bend. Up until this point, the landscape had been empty, and full of hills, with the Silent Woods looming dangerously on the horizon to the south.

Now, however, they had wound their way through the hills, and through the pass Evan could see them—huge metal gates. They stood open like the jaws of a great steel tiger, beckoning them to enter and feed its hunger.

More than just the gates, the city itself rose tall and wide before them. Filled with stone, metal, and dust, the city projected an aura of gray isolation, with buildings lanky, claustrophobic, and dim. From a distance, Evan and Farley could see the streets of the city winding upward, riding the side of the hill until it reached the pinnacle, where a series of five spires stood above it all. There was a thick misty cloud that swirled around them. To Evan, the spires looked like a giant's crown.

Farley sighed heavily. "Ever been to Habbardy?"

"I've never been anywhere."

"Hm. Well, Habbardy's as good as any to start. It's where I grew up."

"And you're wanted here? What did you do?"

"Never mind that."

“Farley, how am I supposed to trust you if you won’t tell me *anything* about who you are?” The farmer raised an eyebrow.

“I’m sorry,” Evan said. “It’s been a chaotic few days. And my head hurts. I just worry that I’m not doing what Zeito says. He gave me clear instructions. I’m supposed to find the Dreamer, whoever that is, and destroy some sort of shadow. I’m very confused and I doubt that Zeito would have me breaking laws with a wanted man.”

“All of this *was* Zeito’s idea. And suffice it to say, for now, that I became a wanted man in this city by following Zeito’s orders.” Farley paused, and sniffed. “Brace yourself—you might become one too. But if you’re smart enough to trust Zeito, then you’re probably smart enough to trust the new thing inside you that was born when The Kingfisher gave you your stone. Sense the peace. If somehow there is none, we’ll leave now.”

Evan’s heart began to race. The great steel jaws of the tiger were swiftly approaching. The dull grayness of the city reminded him of the darkness of the Silent Woods, and it terrified him. His legs felt weak.

He didn’t want to do this. Maybe there was a time that he cared enough about finding adventure to continue in this journey, but that excitement had long since worn off. He longed for home and for his own bed. All he saw in those gates was the deep loneliness he had felt in the Silent Woods. But just like in the woods, Evan heard a flutter and saw a bird light on the rocks by the road—a bird with fire on its chest. The bird trilled, and Evan felt a flame light within him, burning up his fears and doubts. It wasn’t the kind of fire that destroys and devours, but the kind that is holy and pure. Fire that *creates* as it consumes. Evan had nothing in his mind now but that bird, and Zeito’s instructions. Reaching into his pocket almost unconsciously, Evan grabbed the black gem and revealed it to the day, now glowing fiercely and bright.

It was at this moment that time seemed to pause in that mysterious way it does when you sip warm cocoa and count snowflakes or lie in the tall grass at night to watch for shooting stars; when you share a joke with a friend or listen to a loved one singing. It’s the kind of moment that sticks to your mind like sweet

honey and whether you realize it or not, fuels the engine of your heart and weaves the fabric of your being. It's the memory that says, *Your soul was made to love the One who gave you strength to love.*

Nothing about the moment was particularly stunning. The hills around him were barren, as the gloomy gates came closer every second. But the fire on the chest of the Kingfisher contrasted with the shadows, and he was reminded of the way his muscles had relaxed in the presence of the little bird and how all his fears and doubts had instantly left his mind. The bird looked intently at him, seeming to urge him to be at peace.

Evan felt his heart still. He took a deep breath. He imagined resting in Zeito's study, listening to him read. He thought of his pine sapling, growing inch by inch.

He thought of his mother, and wished he hadn't lost her ring.

As he thought these things—remembering—he lifted his head.

He saw the clouds.

Magnificent and white, they towered like great kingdoms of hope and glory, overshadowing even the power of the gloom below. These were not the clouds he had seen leaving the castle, thin, black, and blurred. These clouds sang of majesty and purpose.

"Evan," said Farley. "Are you ok?"

"Did you see the bird?" said Evan. "It came again."

"Hm," grunted Farley, shifting awkwardly in his seat. "No."

"It was right over there—on the road."

"Shhh—lower your voice," he said. "There are guards. At the gate."

"Guards?"

"Interesting. I don't remember these guards. They must be new."

"Wait, what do I say?"

"Say nothing. We just have to be quiet and let them wave us through. The last thing we want is for them to find out who I am."

"Don't they know what you look like?"

"Well, yes. But it's ok, I have a hood."

Farley pulled his hood over his eyes and bent forward like an old man. He feigned a tremble in his veiny hands and coughed loudly.

Evan's heart began to race. The guards had caught sight of the travelers, and Evan desperately tried to think of ways to keep them from discovering who Farley was.

Chapter 15: Through Steel Jaws

Of the two guards, one was fat with a huge beard, the other—skinny and very tall.

“Hello!” said the bigger man with a boomy voice to match. The other man smiled blankly. His teeth were yellow.

“Names,” commanded the tall one impatiently, and laughed. Though, it sounded to Evan more like he was choking than laughing.

“Far—lo,” said Farley, in an elderly voice, and the two men looked at each other. Evan raised an eyebrow.

“Curious name,” said the tall one.

“Nearly as curious as ours,” said the big man, and he chuckled. “I’m Tuck. This grumpy man here is Aresco.”

“State your business, peasants,” said Aresco, taking control of the conversation.

“Just bringing produce to sell,” replied Farley shakily.

“You managed to grow produce with the rain being as it is?”

“Not much.”

“Where do you come from?”

“Just five miles west.”

“What? That close to the Silent Woods?”

Farley shrugged.

“You best be careful, sirs,” interjected Tuck. “Dangerous things live in those woods.”

“We manage,” said Farley.

The two men came closer.

“Listen,” said Aresco. “Let’s cut the small talk and you can get on your way. We’re looking for a certain man.”

“A strong man,” said Tuck with a nod.

“He’s known around these parts for his criminal activity.”

“He’s quite deadly,” said Tuck with another nod. Then he added, “I don’t remember him being as old as you are, though. So you two are free to go.”

“Yes, free to—Tuck!” said Aresco. “The thoroughness of our mission is of greatest profundity!

Tuck scoffed. “Now what the blazes does prof-idny mean? And why thorough? It was your dumb idea to come out here. Why in heaven’s name would Farley try and come through the main gates. You’re making us look bad, Aresco! Since you’ve already forgotten, I should tell you he’s quite crafty.”

“You know I know they know I know that.”

“Quit your babbling, sir!” said Tuck, glaring.

“How dare you call me a babbler! If anyone babbles, it is you, sir. The impertinence!”

“Now what the blazes does impert—sirs, forgive Aresco’s rudeness. Apparently the only sword he cannot wield is his own tongue.”

“Pardon me?” cried Aresco with a gasp.

“You heard me, sir!”

“I know you know they know I know what you just said, Tuck!”

Tuck glared harder and, spacing his words out so as to emphasize the magnitude of each, “Quit your *babbling*, sir!”

“The *point* is,” said Aresco after taking a long breath, “We need to check your belongings for evidence to substantiate your identities.”

“Aresco!” huffed Tuck. What in high heaven could *sub-stin-tilate* possibly mean?”

“It means to check. Obviously.”

“Then just say check!”

“You claim I cannot wield my tongue and yet you do not even know your own tool. You’re like a blind man swinging his sword aimlessly in the dark. Futile.”

“A blind man can see just as well in the dark as he can in the day, Aresco.”

“Exactly.”

“Then, you buffoon, why say he’s in the *dark* if—”

“It is the duty of a servant of King Alder to know one’s language as you know your mind, heart, and sword.”

“I know the vows. How do you think I got this job?”

“Evidently, you tripped on your own stupidity and somehow landed in a pile of purpose and opportunity.”

Evan and Farley had waited there long, watching the two bicker. Both tensed in anticipation. Farley kept his head down low.

“The King is looking for a man named Farley?” he said in his frail voice. “Why would the King be so concerned with one man?”

The two guards looked at each other.

“Uh—” said Tuck. “We got the order from the King himself! Yes!”

“That’s not what they asked!” Aresco growled aside. Then he said, “It’s because he’s the King and he can do what he wants. Now—”

“Please,” Evan said at last. “My grandfather is frail and infirm. We’re just trying to sell a few things before returning home to our farm. May we pass now?”

The two guards halted their quips. Tuck plucked at his beard thoughtfully. He sighed. “Eh, alright.”

“Tuck!” hissed the skinny man. “No, sirs, we’ll at least be checking your goods.”

“Whatever you need,” said Farley.

The two men rummaged about in the produce for a bit, bickering quietly, casting lettuce heads and carrots to the ground recklessly as they did. Then all four heard a loud bump—

“Ow!” said a small voice. “You pulled my hair!”

Evan saw Farley’s grip lock on the reins. His knuckles turned white. From under his sleeves, he could see faint hints of a teal glow.

Little Aurora popped up from the inside of a large crate of lettuce, rubbing her head and wiping a tear from her eye. Then Azalea jumped up from inside the crate as well.

“Hey!” she said defiantly. “At least be gentle if you’re going to go through someone’s stuff!”

“Ey!” said Aresco. “What’s this?”

“Little girls? In the lettuce?” said Tuck.

“I’m not a little girl!” said Azalea, face flushed. “Do you know who I am? I’m Azalea, daughter of Farley, and this is Aurora. Now are you going to apologize?”

Except for Aurora’s faint whimpering, everything became deathly quiet. Seconds passed. Half a minute. Silence. Farley’s grip tightened further and the glow under his sleeves grew brighter.

As soon as Tuck could let out a “wait a second—” there was a flash of teal light and Farley was flipping backward through the air. The two guards craned their necks in speechless awe as he sailed over their heads.

Landing behind them, he grabbed them by their shirts and with unbelievable strength, threw the huge men to the ground.

“Well, Evan,” he said, “I guess your training begins now. Lesson one: drive!”

Evan jumped and fumbled with the reins. Gripping them tightly, he flicked them. The horses reared, the girls fell back in their crates, and the wagon rushed forward. There was another bright flash of teal from behind, and a *thump!* that made the children jolt. Farley had jumped, barely reaching the back of the wagon, his legs dangling out the back.

Evan glanced back. The girls were trying to pull him in. The horses rushed through the steel jaws of Habbardy.

But the two men were already mounting their own horses to hunt them down.

Chapter 16: The Hungry City

Evan held the reins but only barely kept control of the cart. The thunderous rattling of its wheels on the stones of the city had spooked the horses, who rushed madly into the city of Habbardy. Swallowed by its steel jaws, and pursued by Tuck and Aresco close behind them, Evan felt his heart pound in sync with the thrumming of the horses' hooves.

There was no turning back.

As they raced down Habbardy's streets, the city became a blur of shapes and metal.

Many jumped out of their way, pulling their yelping children back at the sight of the boy driving a careening cart with two girls and their father hanging on in the back. Bumping over every rock jutting out from the road, Evan fought to stay on.

"I can't slow them down!" he called out.

"Don't!" cried Farley, legs still dangling. "The guards are gaining on us!"

Sure enough, as Evan turned to look over his shoulder, he saw Tuck and Aresco gaining on them, rushing up the slope behind them, yelling at people to get out of their way.

Suddenly, Evan heard a *clink!* His heart dropped as he saw one of the bolts on the harness dancing wildly, threatening to loose the horses from the cart.

It was right there by his feet, but the cart rushed at so fast a pace that he couldn't let go of the reins or keep his eyes off the road ahead. Placing the reins in one hand, he leaned over to try and fix the harness.

The wind rushed violently about his face. His eyes stung with the dirt that flew through the air.

He held his breath.

Another sharp *bump!* and Evan tossed in his seat. He gripped the cart edge, holding himself in. The horses had full control now and wove down the streets of Habbardy with reckless speed.

He reached out to press the bolt back in place, but he was shoved suddenly by something behind him. It was Azalea, who had crawled up to the front.

She rolled into the seat next to Evan. He huffed.

“What are you doing?!”

“I’m *trying* to help.”

“You’re on my arm!”

“Let me fix that bolt.”

“No it’s fine—”

Then the horses turned, jerking the cart suddenly, and knocking the bolt into the street.

Evan gasped, Azalea cried out, and the horses bolted off away from the cart and into the darkness of Habbardy’s alleyways.

Now horseless, the cart wobbled and pulled hard right, scraping against a nearby building. Toppling several barrels and scattering a crate of pumpkins, the cart shot forward until it crashed at last into a market stall, set up against a thick stone wall. A cloud of dust and broken wood exploded into the air.

Above them all, the red and white striped cloth of the stall fluttered down and rested on the remains of the cart.

Evan sat up from a pile of crimson apples he had landed in. He flinched at the bruise on his left shin. Above him, a gentle white light shone through the cloth.

The world became still again.

As he stood up, he lifted the cloth to see the rest of the cart. Its front was completely smashed, and the back was barely left intact. The fresh heads of lettuce and the carrots were scattered and smashed in the dirt. Ruined. Brushing off his clothes, he stepped through the rubble.

Farley had already jumped up out of the wood chips and pulled Aurora to himself. He was checking her head for bruises. She whimpered.

Azalea came up last with a small cut on her arm. She pressed her hand against it.

A chill ran up Evan's spine. He heard horses trotting nearer and nearer, rebounding off the maze-like walls of Habbardy. And he heard voices.

"Tuck!" hissed Aresco. "You had to go and lose them, didn't you?"

"It's the lighting!" said Tuck loudly. "Habbardy at dusk—hate it. Boss said this place was supposed to be the crowning glory of the Fourth Quadrant. Gives me the chills—creepy folk slithering around everywhere. Why anyone would ever want to come here is beyond me."

"Slithering!" returned Aresco. "Strong word! Keep that up and maybe people will start to see you as a man of true cognition."

Tuck furrowed his eyebrows. "I don't need your stupid co-gnishin."

Aresco huffed dramatically. "Cognition. Knowledge, Tuck. That wasn't an insult. It's what separates you from the peasants. Get that into your thick skull, will you?"

"Hey, all I care about is getting the job done. Boss wants Farley out of the way, so the sooner we find him, the better. I don't think I can bear wearing this awful guard outfit any longer."

"Oh, stop complaining."

"It's too small, Aresco! It's pinching my arms!"

"You expected it to be tailored to fit your meatball body when we swiped it off the last guy?"

"Who you calling meatball?"

"Tuck, I'm actually implying that the withered skeletons that crawl around in this town are really just meatballs disguised as bones."

"Really?"

"No!"

"All I'm saying is Boss could've given us some help. I think he hates us."

"He just wants the mission to succeed."

"Then he should have helped us instead of running off on his own!"

"You know I know he knows we know that."

There was a pause.

“Quit your *babbling*, sir!”

By this point, Farley had gathered the children against the wall. They all had heard the two bickering and presently held their breath. Farley bent down and took Evan by the shoulders.

“Listen carefully,” he said. “These guys are after me. I’m putting you kids in danger by being with you. I’m going to make a distraction and try to lead them away.”

“What do you want us to do?” asked Evan.

“Stay safe. I want us all to meet at the blacksmith’s shop downtown.”

“Wait, where is the blacksmith’s?” asked Evan.

“It’s easy—not too far past that arch. Then it’s just left, right, right, left, hard right at the lamppost, and a slight left at the fork in the road. Then you’ll see the biggest cloud of smoke you’ve ever seen coming from the shop. You’ll know where to go from there.”

With that, his bracelets glowed, and he rushed off into the light.

The children, still hiding in the shadows, followed him to the corner, where they watched him catch the attention of Tuck and Aresco, eager shouts signaling the reignition of their pursuits.

Farley lept away, propelling himself with bursts coming from his bracelets, with Tuck and Aresco following. He launched himself down a dark alleyway, which flashed with teal light.

Chapter 17: The Lost and Found

Until he had seen the place, Habbardy had been in his mind a bountiful and happy city—the crown of the Fourth Quadrant. People from all the other three quadrants were supposed to come here for the best sales, the best goods, and the best opportunities.

But now, trekking through the dark alleyways and the muddy streets, Evan wasn't so sure. The city was quiet, though there were lots of people. And amid the gray cobble, the citizens clutched their growling stomachs and closed their weary eyes. Many of them just stood there, waiting for something, looking up at the sky occasionally, watching each other. Evan couldn't figure out what they were waiting for.

Most prominently, however, were the knights. Wearing the same black uniform as Tuck and Aresco, the men watched the streets, scowling, their hands readied on their swords.

"It's best we're not seen by them," said Azalea. "Dad says the knights are not friendly around here."

"Why are they here?"

"Don't ask me! They came from the castle. You should know."

"I've never seen them before, but my father usually has me stay in my room or in the tower with Zeito."

They continued down the streets, keeping to the shadows, and struggling desperately to follow Farley's instructions as close as possible. The alleys were narrow, and dirty, the streets broad and unkempt. The city was eerily quiet—except for the knights.

They coughed loudly, or whistled. Most of them paced. Evan saw two of them throwing rocks at a large hotel window, trying to break out every last shard. One of them almost saw the children lurking about in the shadows, but must have been lost in thought, picking his teeth and humming, so he didn't notice.

After their fourth turn down the streets, Evan was beginning to lose sense of where he was in the city. At first, it had been easy to track where he was going,

because he had been able to see the five tall spires at the pinnacle of the city. But now, in the midst of all the buildings looming over him, everything looked the same.

“Were we supposed to turn here, or wait for the next fork?”

“You forgot the directions?” asked Azalea. Aurora whimpered.

“I just don’t know which fork in the road he was meaning for us to find.”

“Wait, did we turn at the lamppost?”

“I think so.”

“You *think* so?”

“There was a lamp, so we turned.”

“I didn’t see a lamppost.”

“Well, it was hanging off of one of the buildings—”

“That’s not a lamppost, Evan!”

“It’s ok, we can just turn around.”

“You can never just *turn around* in Habbardy.”

They were silent for a moment, searching, trying to identify something familiar.

“Lost,” said Aurora sadly and she began to cry.

A knight stood by a building corner. Hearing the crying, he woke from his bored stupor.

“Hush,” said Azalea. She lifted the little girl onto her back.

“I think we can find our way again if we can see the towers,” Evan said.

“See that sign?”

Azalea nodded.

“It leads to the harbor. We should be able to see the towers from an open area like that.”

So the children continued slowly through the maze of buildings, carefully avoiding any attention from the knights.

At last they reached the harbor. Like the rest of the city, it was surprisingly empty, with only a few boats docked. There were, however, more men there than the children could count.

“Are these knights too?” wondered Evan aloud, noticing their change in demeanor and clothing.

“I don’t think so,” said Azalea.

Unlike the knights, these men had bows and arrows, and many of them stood near the water, watching with quiet patience.

As they stood observing the serious men, a deep voice surprised them. “What are *you* doing out here?”

Chapter 18: Purple Fire in the Moonlight

“Watch it, pal!” said Azalea. “You don’t want to mess with me. If I wasn’t carrying my sister then I’d have already sent a knife straight through your—”

“No, no!” said the voice. “I don’t want to hurt you. I noticed you three standing out on your own. Where is your mother? Don’t you know it’s dangerous to be out on the streets with the king’s knights hanging around?”

It was a tall man with a bow slung over his back and tall black boots. His face was wrinkled with worry, but he spoke kindly.

“We were just trying to get home,” said Evan.

“Where is home? Can I point you in the right direction?”

“Who are you?” said Azalea. Aurora hid her face behind her sister’s shoulder.

“I’m just a merchant. I stand guard out here.”

“How do we know we can trust you?”

“Hopefully you know we merchants are very protective of our own. The bows and the fire you see are for outsiders who try to mess with Habbardy. But I don’t particularly favor these knights either. Don’t trust ‘em. So I figure you kids better be getting home.”

“We come from the blacksmith’s,” said Evan.

“Ah, old Crowler? I know ‘em.”

Evan paused, then nodded.

“You must be his grandchildren. I’ve heard good things.” The merchant laughed. “Have you never been down to the harbor?”

“Grandpa never let us,” said Azalea, catching on.

The big man laughed. “That makes sense, with everything that’s happened. But I’m surprised he lets you call him *grandpa*. I’ve never heard anyone call him anything but Crowler, even his own children!”

“I only say it around other people,” said Azalea, laughing along nervously. “You know him. Good ol’ Crowler...”

“That’s right. Good ol’ Crowler.” The merchant sighed, happily. “Well, if you turn here, this street will lead you straight to his shop. You just have to take a few stairs. And by a few, I mean a lot! But it’s the fastest way, and the knights don’t hang around the stairs. Too intimidating I guess. You can actually see a bit of the smoke from his shop in between the first and second of the towers up the hill.”

The children thanked him and began their journey again up the stairs. The staircase itself was steep and looked like it lasted forever, fading into the fog. Taking deep breaths, the children began their trek up the endless stairs.

To the children, it seemed to take hours, pausing frequently to catch their breath, and waiting on poor Aurora, who stepped as fast as her little legs could move her, since Azalea could carry her up the stairs for only so long.

At last, they came upon a large central street at the top of the staircase. Down the street, at the end, was the blacksmith’s shop, and the children’s energy revived.

As soon as they started towards the shop, however, Evan noticed a woman and two small children across the street. She was holding a large armful of bread in one arm while trying to guide her two squirming kids with the other.

Unfortunately, she had caught the attention of one of the knights, an especially grim looking man with a stiff beard and a dark shadow over his eyes. He was standing over her, scowling and saying,

“I *said*, the King is in need of your bread.”

“Sir, this is the only food I have for our family. I just saved enough to buy it, and you know as well as I do with the famine and the rumors—”

“What rumors? That stuff about a monster? King’s gone mad if you ask me, sending us on a wild goose chase.”

“If you would just find a little bit of grace for me then—”

“But here’s the thing,” said the knight, striking the air with his hands as if laying out a logical argument. “I want that bread, so you have to give it to me.”

“What will we do for food then?”

“Eat the stones for all I care.” He laughed mockingly.

The woman glared at the man, and from across the street Evan could see her cheeks get bright red.

“Evan,” said Azalea. “Don’t stare. Let’s keep moving.”

But Evan didn’t move. “They need help.”

“The blacksmith’s is right there. We can’t risk exposing ourselves.”

It was true—they had spent their entire time in the city keeping quiet. But Evan couldn’t bring himself to turn away. His cheeks flushed and he clenched his jaw. A blue bird with fire on its chest zipped across the street, and trilled in the distance.

“*Mom*,” said one of the kids. “I’m *hungry*. Can we *go*?” the kid tugged on her arm.

“Just one second, dear.”

“The king himself said,” continued the guard, “that his knights could ask anything we needed in our search of his pet. I’m awfully weary from all my searching, so I’m gonna have to require that bread from you. King’s orders.”

The woman stared violently at him, then she huffed and tried to walk past him.

“No,” said the knight. “You don’t get let off that easy. Give me that.” And he grabbed at the bread. The woman held on, but the knight’s aggressive pull knocked all the bread out of her hands and into the muddy street.

“You ruined my bread!” shouted the knight. “Now what am I gonna eat?”

He shoved her angrily against the wall, and she fell to the ground. The kids began to cry.

“How does it feel to be treated with disrespect?” said the knight, furious.

“Please,” said the woman, trembling. “Just leave us alone.”

The knight, growling, didn’t see it at first, but a purple glow arose, lighting up the woman’s face from behind him. It grew brighter and the woman closed her eyes.

Turning around, the knight saw a boy, standing there in the middle of the street under the moonlight, holding something that burned with purple fire

around his hand. The purple light seeped through his veins, and shone through his eyes.

“Stand back,” said Evan. “I am the son of Alder, prince of the Fourth. Leave, and never come back, or face the consequences.”

“S-stay out of my business, b-boy,” said the knight weakly, but he was shaking. A burst of purple light flashed and the knight sailed down the street and rolled to an unconscious heap against a stone wall.

After Evan calmed down, he hardly knew what had happened. But the sound of The Kingfisher’s trill rang in his ears. He found Azalea and Aurora, who were helping the woman to her feet and consoling the children, who stopped crying and hugged their mother.

“Thank you,” said the woman, brushing herself off. “You didn’t have to do that.”

“I think I did,” said Evan. “Are you ok?”

“Yes, I’m fine. Happens more than you might think, unfortunately. Though it doesn’t usually get that rough.”

“I’m so sorry,” said Evan.

“No, no, I’m sorry. Um—” said the woman, embarrassed. “I don’t remember you visiting Crowler’s shop.”

“How did you know—”

“Oh, anyone who can make light like that has been to Crowler’s shop. But I don’t remember purple.”

“I’ve never been.”

“Wait, your stone is unforged? How did you access its power?”

“How do you—”

“Oh, I’m sorry,” she said. “My name is Lily. Crowler is my father. Here let me help you. I’m sure you’re cold out here. It’s the least I can do.”

When they reached the blacksmith’s at last, Lily and her kids walked briskly in, and she called out, “Crowler! Company! Very important company!”

From inside the corner came a huge man with wild gray hair, a squinty eye, and a misshapen hand. He had a large blacksmith's apron on. Soot marked his face. In his good hand was a hammer.

Then came a familiar voice, from behind the big man.

"What took you kids so long?" said Farley.

Chapter 19: Lies of the Nebo Kalim

THE FOURTH QUADRANT: ON THE SEA OF THE NEBO KALIM

Waves splashed and mist sprayed Zander's face. He braced himself on the ruddy mast of the creaky boat Callen had provided and watched grimly as his troops rowed against the fierce waves.

He ground his teeth. Darian the Conqueror would hate it if he knew his son was risking the lives of his troops by taking short cuts across the Nebo Kalim.

But Darian would never know.

Sure, the route wasn't ideal, but it was better than trying to hack their way through the overgrowth of the Third Quadrant. Even if they had managed to carve a path through the foliage, the weeds and shrubbery were sure to grow back, filling the path back in and blocking off any quick escape after their infiltration of Habbardy.

So when Callen showed up, the scrawny merchant hoping for a deal, Zander decided he'd take his chances on the sea. Still, Zander had told him the plan and Callen had squirmed like a little child. The Nebo Kalim was notorious for its heavy, abrasive, unrelenting mist. The cloudy fog hung low over the water day and night. It never left.

Zander knew full well the nightmarish tales of the peasants, merchants, warriors, princes and kings who had sailed the Nebo Kalim and never returned. He shuddered to watch the midnight waters slap against the creaking hull of the boat—and to think of the skeleton ships that lay at the bottom of the massive lake.

Zander watched Callen, standing at the front of the boat, peering into the mist, searching quietly. The merchant clutched his stomach, a yellow-green coloring in his face. Still, he *knew* the Nebo Kalim and its unique connection between the four quadrants. At least, he claimed to know. Zander still wasn't sure whether he could trust anything Callen had to say.

Looking around, Zander sighed. Hardly anything more than the boat itself could be seen in the mist. Yet somehow, the cloud hung low enough that he could see the Third Quadrant's tallest mountain rising up through the fog.

It was Invictus, named by Darian himself—the only thing on this Earth his father respected more than himself. It was a power that no man had conquered, a mountain no man had ever been able to climb, though many had tried.

Zander vowed to climb Invictus one day.

Silent as it stood above the mist, Invictus seemed to glare down at Zander, with the sun starting to fall behind it. It stared down at him, which reminded him of his father. He tried to ignore the mountain, but he felt the weight of its gaze. He could almost feel its breath on his shoulder—a presence that would never leave, visible from every corner of the world that Zander knew.

Staring angrily at the mountain, Zander let memories of his father fill his mind and soak there for a little while—the shouting, the disgusting smiles, the bitter silence.

Zander's breath caught in his throat. The mountain wouldn't stop staring. He could almost feel him saying, *"Stupid son. You're going to lead your men to their graves. Do you want that weight on your shoulders? Be prepared to face it."*

"I know what I'm doing," Zander said to the mountain, which seemed to grow darker as the sun fell lower.

"Do you?"

"You can trust me."

"Can I?"

"Trust me, father!"

"Should I?"

"I'll prove you can trust me, father. Just see what I do to Habbardy. Just see what I do when I find the prince of the Fourth. I'll kill him for you, father."

"Just like you did last time?"

"They didn't have to die last time. There was no reason for it."

"I asked you to end them and you disobeyed me."

"They would be more useful to us alive."

"Our land is cursed because of you."

"That wasn't my fault!"

"If you had obeyed me our fields would not be turning into forests and our forests would not be turning into jungles. Our land would be bountiful as it once was."

"How was I supposed to know?"

"You failed me. You're too weak."

"I'm not weak."

"Then you're just ungrateful. I gave you the world and you chose to ruin it."

Zander flushed.

"I never should have sent you on this mission. You don't have the strength to do what must be done."

"I d-do" he stuttered. "I w-will."

"See my power, boy?" shouted silent Invictus. *"See how I loom over the Earth? No man can overcome me. Even the mist of the Nebo Kalim cannot blot me out. I overpower it."*

Zander grit his teeth and shuddered. "What can you d-do to *me*, father? What can you do to m-me? All you can do is w-watch. You can't blot *me* out." Zander pretended to squish the mountain between his fingers. But his hand trembled.

"I already have. Prove yourself, or you're not my son."

"I'm t-trying father," said Zander, watching the sun lower farther behind Invictus.

"Not even the sun itself can withstand me. It is a temporary source of power. I am infinite. I blot out the sun." And the sun fell behind the mountain, turning the mist into a murky, lonely, prison-like night. Zander shivered. Then, in the dark, he heard the babbling words of the mystic fool looping in his mind: *"Kedha . . . Afenu, word. Pulling away. Shadow overly. Dragon. Kedha . . . Afenu, silence."*

“Ahoy there buddy! Hello? Hello!” said Callen, annoyed. He was waving his hand in front of Zander’s face. “Anyone in there?”

Zander shook himself and glared. “Get out of my face, peasant.”

Callen took a step back. “Hey, don’t blame me. You took a little adventure into the stars. That was you.”

“What do you want?” growled Zander.

“I just thought you might want to know about the sharp rocks jutting out of the water ahead.” Striding swiftly to the front of the boat, Zander peered into the mist. Sure enough, a black forest of spear-like rocks stood tall above the water, dancing dangerously around them.

Zander began to motion for the rowers to steer right—away from the rocks—but they continued their monotonous pull, aiming them straight for the spears.

“We have to navigate through,” said Callen, shrugging.

“Can’t we go around?”

“Nope. It’s the only way into Habbardy from the water.”

“How is that possible?”

“Never been to Habbardy, huh?”

Zander sighed. His fists clenched. “I’m not taking any more unnecessary risks.”

“Habbardy is up on a cliff. That dark zone up ahead—it’s not just darkness. That’s three hundred feet of rock rising up out of the water. The sharp stuff on top—that’s the city.”

Zander leaned back and through the mist could just make out the jagged darkness that was Habbardy itself. He glanced back and saw the mountain, still staring at him. He tried to hold back a shudder.

“We have to navigate to their port from below—through the rocks. But it’s where all the merchants go . . .”

“So we’ll be fine, right? You’re a merchant. Get us in there.”

“Well, that’s the thing. Merchants *do* sound like a cuddly group of people, but they’re the last group of people you want to run into at Habbardy. They’re

well, over-protective. I've heard they shoot fiery arrows at ships that aren't marked with their seal."

"You've *heard*?"

"I've heard . . . as in, I've lost two or three, or—then there was that one time . . ."

"Why didn't you warn me?"

"Hey, you're the one who chucked me onto this cursed ship! I hate the water."

"How about I toss you in right now? Seems like a good time for a swim!"

"Look, our best bet is to anchor down and sleep till the morning. The merchants are most stubborn at night. If we go in the day, we might be able to convince them to change their minds." He rubbed his fingers together. "They *are* an economical people after all."

"No, we carry on."

"Did you not hear what I just said?"

"I heard you."

"We can't pass at night. I don't want to spend another second on this water, but we can't get through. I'm telling you now—we're going to die if we try."

"We'll take our chances."

"Can you even see the rocks in the water? Do you have some sort of owl-vision?"

Zander could only barely see the rocks in the water. He said nothing. Then from the back of the boat there was a laugh.

"It's cause poor baby has nightmares at night," said Wren. "You're gonna kill us all to avoid your dreams for another hour?"

"That's not it!" said Zander fiercely, seething.

"Say that all you want, but I'm not going to let you crash us on those rocks or hand us over to some battle-happy merchants."

"It's fine—we'll make it. Row!"

Wren walked up and put his hand on his sword—his favorite threat. It was his only threat that held actual weight. “The goal of the mission is stealth. Pull yourself together and lead your men.”

Zander was breathing heavily. His eyes flicked about. Then he motioned for the anchor to be put down.

“Weak,” said Wren, and laughed.

“*Weak*,” said the mountain, and it laughed too.

Chapter 20: Obsidian Destiny

At the sound of their father's voice, Azalea and Aurora rushed quickly past the menacing blacksmith and leapt into their father's arms. He chuckled.

The blacksmith continued staring at the boy standing in his doorway.

"So you're Evan," he said quietly.

"Yes, sir." said Evan, trying to straighten himself to look taller.

"Very good." said the blacksmith, still scowling, still squinting. "Very good."

Then, without another word, the blacksmith turned and walked away, past Farley in his living room.

Farley saw Evan's confusion, and laughed. "That's Crowler's way of saying, 'follow me.' It's not super clear."

Evan caught up with Crowler, who was unlocking a door in the back. When they entered, Evan found Crowler's shop, connected to his home. The shop was spacious, with a large window, used to take orders and pass out completed projects, that was now bolted shut. There was a huge chimney, and a furnace that looked like it had been used recently. In the center of the room was a countertop covered with every kind of tool.

"You've been given a stone, then?" said the big man. "May I see it?"

Evan pulled out the stone from his pocket. It was warm in his hand. He handed it to Crowler.

The blacksmith held the stone in his misshapen hand, curled into a cup. He walked across the room and put a mechanism over his head—a flimsy looking gadget that held onto the back of his head while providing a magnifying glass for his good eye.

"Hm," he grunted.

They stood there for a long time, Evan waiting and watching while the old blacksmith observed the stone.

"Do you know what kind of stone this is?" said the blacksmith at last.

"No, what is it?"

“You really don’t know?”

“I don’t.”

“Hm. I don’t either.” He paused, and then called loudly for Farley to come.

“Were you with the boy when he was given his stone?”

“No I wasn’t.”

“Why not?”

“The Kingfisher has his own timing. You know that.”

“He’s never given someone their stone without their master present. Evan, were you with Zeito?”

“No, I was alone in the woods.”

“The Silent Woods? Hm.”

“I thought it was obsidian,” said Farley.

“It does look like obsidian, but it’s not. This is far older than anything I’ve ever seen. Why is it warm, Evan?”

“I think it’s because I used it outside to help Lily.”

Then both Farley and the blacksmith stopped staring at the stone and looked at Evan.

“What do you mean you *used* it?” asked Farley.

“I held it in my hand and it glowed and I knocked some guy back. Actually, I think the stone did that—I wasn’t really thinking about the stone when it happened.”

“Well, it did heal him too- earlier,” added Farley.

“This stone,” said Crowler slowly, “must have incredible power if it can be wielded so soon by someone without any experience. We must forge this quickly. It’s unpredictable in its current state.” Crowler relit his furnace, and taking the stone with his tongs, he placed it in the heat.

When he pulled it out, however, the stone looked untouched, and it glistened. Crowler grunted and put the stone on his anvil. Taking a massive hammer, he attempted to reform the stone. The sound of the strike rang through the shop.

But the stone still seemed untouched.

For two hours, Crowler cycled through this process, firing the stone, attacking it with the hammer, grunting.

At last he put out the fire, took off his apron, and said, matter of factly, “It cannot be forged. It will not take the shape of anything new. It will not be mastered.”

Farley scratched his beard. “Nothing you can do?”

Crowler grunted. “Hm. I think this stone is not even at its full power, though it is volatile and unforged. See this chipping here?”

Farley and Evan leaned in.

“The stone is incomplete. It’s missing its brothers.”

Chapter 21: The Sea of Dreams

Zander woke clutching the boat frame, his jaw clenched shut. He took strong deep breaths. The dream had come again. In his mind, the black ax still flew through the air. He felt the tree's pain as it struck.

It was the middle of the night. Filtered among the foggy particles, the moonlight lit the boat dimly. The wind blew silently over the water and played with his hair. It wove around him and the cold air stung.

Though most of his men slept, one kept watch. He was silent with the wind, sitting at the end of the boat, watching the waves move in their constant dance.

Zander squinted in the pale light. It was his brother.

"The dreams are getting worse aren't they," said Wren, still looking at the water. He was holding a small piece of wood, and a knife—carving.

Zander said nothing. There was an emptiness in the air—a sadness that played in the mist.

"Dreams," said Wren quietly, shaving off a piece of wood into the sea. "They're like water. Like the Nebo Kalim. Mysterious. Daunting. Oppressive."

"What do you care?"

"Not all dreams are bad, you know. You shouldn't ignore them."

"That's not your business."

Silence. Wren shaved another piece of wood into the sea. "How deep do you think this sea goes?" he said.

"It's too dark to see anything. Maybe a few hundred feet?"

"Could be. Could be much more. You can't tell. What if everything we've ever wanted is lying just beneath the surface of this water, as if the waves are just a veil?"

"There's nothing for you under the water." Zander lay back down, but his eyes were wide open.

“For all we know, this water could be *thousands* of feet deep. There could be mountains, full of glory, waiting down there, their peaks trying to breach the surface. But we never care to look. So no one ever sees them.”

“People have looked and they’re all still down there.”

“Do you ever think about what’s out there? About the lands we don’t know?”

“We have everything we need at the castle.”

“But what if we don’t?”

“Our father provides for us.”

“Our father gives us only poverty,” said Wren, chipping off another piece of wood aggressively into the water.

“What’s gotten into you? Are you sick?”

Wren was silent as he looked over his creation—a small bear.

“I must be sick,” he whispered, “to hunger so much when I’m already full.”

“What?”

Then he turned to look at Zander, his familiar sneer returning. “If you can’t get a grip on your emotions, I’m going to have to take over the mission. These people can’t be led by a baby who cares only about his own dreams and status.”

“You don’t understand.”

“No, I understand perfectly. But you can’t hold on to your own fears and your reputation with father at the same time. One or both are bound to fall. If you don’t kill the prince when we find him, then I will.”

“You won’t have to,” said Zander angrily, and he stood up. Then he raised his voice and began clapping his hands. “Wake up! Start rowing. We’re going into Habbardy and no merchants are going to hold us back.”

Chapter 22: Habbardy's Harbor

The ship coasted softly through the ebony forest and Zander watched breathlessly as the boat narrowly dodged sharp rocks. The whole entourage was awake now and they were not happy about it—especially Callen, who grimly guided the boat.

The fog was thick as ever, but now that they had ventured into the rocky forest, there was no turning back. Callen had grumbled constantly about it since waking up.

“You just wait,” he said. “We’ll be seeing flaming flying arrows any minute now.”

The company waited eagerly for any word from Callen, Zander, or Wren, but there was nothing to report.

At last, Zander stood at the prow of the boat, and through the fog, noticed a bright orange flicker in the distance.

“What’s that, up ahead?” he asked.

“Here we go...” said Callen and he clutched his stomach. Wren just stared stolidly into the distance.

“Everyone quiet down—stop rowing,” said Zander. They all crouched down, trying to hide themselves in the fog—to become like the fog.

The boat began to drift, carried on its own momentum through the cloud, closer and closer to the light. As they drifted nearer and the silence became more deafening, more lights appeared. They were scattered all across the waterfront.

“Fires,” said Callen. “For lighting arrows.”

But after minutes of waiting and drifting, nothing happened. Callen began to rise.

“Funny—” he said. “We should have been discovered by now. Or at the bottom of the sea. Why aren’t they firing?”

“Maybe they’re out doing something else?”

“No—never,” said Callen.

Wren chuckled. “They probably just saw our tiny boat and knew we aren’t a threat—especially with Zander the Child leading us.”

“Quiet, Wren.” hissed Zander. “Not the time.”

Before long, the docks came into view. Though the fog was thick, they began to see what they were approaching. The fires were lit, spread out on stone pillars across the edges of the wooden planks, but no men stood with them. Bows and packs of arrows were scattered haphazardly, left unattended.

No one was there.

A mist, separate from the fog, tinged with black and blue, drifted over the harbor, water falling over its sides and covering the face of the sea.

The boat creaked and thumped as it bumped against the dock, arriving at the port. For a moment, all the men sat in silence, looking around, wondering if all of a sudden the merchant clan were just hiding, waiting in the dark—hunters in the night.

Zander, still wary, signaled them to exit the boat. They practically tip-toed, held by the ominous feeling created in the eerie silence. Flames flickered and wooden boards creaked, but hardly anything made a sound.

Looking into the darkness, Zander observed the lights in the steep rock walls lifting up to the pinnacle of Habbardy. From the sea, Habbardy was like a great tower, with steep roads and stairs leading up to the five tall towers at its peak. In the fog, it was very dark and gray, but yellow candle light shone through the windows of the sleeping city.

Suddenly, there was a thump and a crash coming from the opposite end of the harbor, accompanied by an angry whispering,

“Tuck! There was only one thing in this whole harbor you could have knocked over and you found it. Have you *no* trepidation?”

“I’m gonna trapidate *you* if you don’t move over! You’re jabbing me with your elbow!”

“I’m trying to *see!*”

“Don’t speak so loud! They’ll hear us!”

“You know I know they know I know that!”

Silence. Then in a quick and sharp hiss, “Quit your *babbling*, sir!”

Zander and his company had stood curiously, listening to the bickering whispers of the fellows hiding behind crates up ahead. But Callen seemed unnerved, fidgeting at the sound of their voices.

Wren noticed, and laughed, “Know something, runt?”

“Nope! Nothing,” replied Callen. “*What?* I don’t know them,” and he chuckled awkwardly. Zander turned slowly and put his hands on his hips.

Then the bickering voices silenced suddenly, and, calling out cautiously, one said, “Boss?”

Callen stiffened.

“An employer?” said Zander. “You?”

“I told you both to stop calling me that!” growled Callen. “Get over here!”

The two men popped up from behind the barrel and approached Callen. Aresco held his head like a wounded puppy. Tuck just scratched his chin.

“*What* are you doing here?” whispered Callen through his teeth.

“Hunting,” said Tuck loudly, oblivious to the evident caution in all the men’s eyes.

“*Still?*”

“Well,” said Aresco, scoffing. “Farley’s no easy target. We were on his tail just moments ago but—”

“But, what?”

“The sun got in our eyes.”

“The sun!”

“We were chasing him through town and he just vanished—”

“Just like that?”

“Well, yeah!”

“Do you know where he is now?”

The two men shuffled awkwardly.

“Did you even look? What are you doing down here at the harbor?”

“We weren’t running away!” said Tuck.

“Before you get mad,” said Aresco. “Let me explain.”

“What could you possibly have been running from?”

“Well, we were scouring the city for Farley—”

“—And buying pastries,” added Tuck gleefully.

“When the inexplicable happened!”

“—The inexplicable!”

Callen sighed. “I don’t see how carefully you could have been searching while eating pastries.”

“Very carefully! Anyway . . . out of the corner of my eye I saw the kid we had seen with Farley.”

“Hey!” said Tuck. “I saw ‘em first.”

Aresco jabbed Tuck with his elbow. Tuck yelped. “Right as I was about to go and grab the scrawny little guy I decided it would be wiser to come and tell you first.”

“Some *crazy* stuff was happenin’ up there Boss,” said Tuck. “You shoulda seen it! That kid’s got some sort of spell on ‘em or something.”

Then Zander stepped in. “What sort of *stuff* was happening?”

“Who’s this buffoon, Boss?” said Tuck, and he laughed.

Zander glared ominously and Callen turned white. “That, Tuck.” he said slowly, “is the prince of the Third Quadrant . . . King Darian’s son.”

Then Tuck matched his paleness and began apologizing profusely—loudly.

“Quiet! Stop crying!” said Zander. “I’m after a boy. The prince of the Fourth. Answer my question!”

Tuck’s eyes widened. “The kid was staring at some soldier when his hands caught on fire! It was all purple and scary! As soon as we saw it we got out of there. And I dropped my pastry too.”

Callen caught his breath. He began muttering to himself. “What is he doing with...”

“Callen?” said Zander.

“Anytime something strange is going on in Habbardy, Farley is around. And this time, I think he’s really gotten himself in deep. I know I told you that the Prince of the Fourth would be in the Silent Woods, but . . .”

“But what?”

“But the Prince is here, with Farley. Purple fire couldn’t come from anywhere else.”

“Are you sure? How do you know?”

“Because he told me the Prince would come to him one day. . .”

“He told you?”

“Well . . . yes,” said Callen, and he sighed. “Farley’s my father.”

Chapter 23: The Hunter in the Darkness

In the Silent Woods, pine trees rattled in the wind like a thousand cobra tails. A murmur glided among the boughs: *Kedha, Afenu . . . Silence.*

Hanging delicately in the sky, the moon cast somber shadows with its powdery light, which curled around the tree trunks and wove its way into the quiet blackness.

And a great dark beast lurked among those shadows.

It curled up its back and let a jagged growl roll up in its chest and pour forth like smoke. The moonlight gleamed on its teeth, its still eyes—bright white discs—peering out from the dark of the woods. It was on the edge of the treeline, a border it had not been allowed to cross. Confined to the woods, the beast had tested daily the limits of the blue fire that held it prisoner.

But now it pawed the line, its claws dragging into the velvet grass shining in the open moonlight, and it knew it was free.

The border couldn't hold it any more. And it had prey to catch.

"The boy . . . the boy! Evan . . ." came a whisper in its mind.

The mist that hung around its gangly shoulders flicked like a huge gray cape. It felt power burning behind its eyes.

It turned to face the metallic city on the hill, with five spires at the top. The mist around it began to slither, and it started its way towards the gates.

Stretching its legs, it bolted like a flash of shadowy lightning and the wind itself couldn't keep up.

Chapter 24: Fate as Light Fades

There was a new necklace around Evan's neck. It wasn't his mother's jade ring, stolen in the Silent Woods. It was a silver chain with his obsidian stone fastened at the end—unforged.

Evan exited the blacksmith's shop dolefully. He thought that once he had the stone forged, as Farley said, then all his questions would be answered. But now there seemed to be more questions, more doubt, and more uncertainty.

A sharp pain pulsed on his temple. There was no scar, but the wound the beast had given him still hurt.

For a moment, he wished that he had never told Zeito that he had seen the shadowy crown hovering over his father's head, the crown that had started it all. He knew, though, that he would never have been able to keep a secret from him for long. Evan sighed. He missed Zeito.

Farley and the girls were with him, but the girls were silent. They watched their father's eyes, who stared grimly into the distance.

He was watching the sky.

On the outer reaches of town, where they had first entered, black clouds were forming. They were thick and rolled around, thick and full. But these clouds were only a tail of a greater source.

There were giant clouds on the horizon, as black as their tail, but as tall as mountains. They loomed over the Silent Woods and rain poured forth freely.

"Something's wrong," Farley whispered, exhaling. "Nothing has gone to plan. I was supposed to have time to train you. Your stone was supposed to be forged—controlled."

Evan said nothing and shuddered. If Farley was afraid, what hope was there? He glanced down at the black rock hanging from his neck. He felt its rough edges.

"Zeito told me to find a dreamer and then destroy the source of the shadow plaguing our land. He never told me to forge the stone, just to find it. Training or

not, forged stone or none, I made a promise, and I need to finish what he told me to do.”

“Admirable, Evan. But you don’t know what’s coming.”

“It’s the beast, isn’t it.”

Farley said nothing. His bracelets began to glow. Then he sighed. “That crown you saw, Evan, was more than a vision. It was a marking. It has chosen you as its prey and it won’t stop until it hunts you down and kills you.”

“That’s why it came after me in the Silent Woods, wasn’t it?”

“Yes.”

“If what you’re telling me is true, I can’t run forever from it. I have to face it. I think that’s what Zeito wanted me to do.”

“You’re not afraid?”

Evan was trembling. “I’m terrified.”

“You were supposed to be trained at this point. But you’re not ready. You have to run. Go to the harbor, find a boat, and sail as far away from this place as you can.”

“How could I run?”

“I’ll go with him,” said Azalea. “You have to go, don’t you?”

“I do. Evan, this problem is far bigger than you realize. Everyone is involved. And you are a critical player in this horrible game of chess.”

“Am I supposed to just leave everyone behind?”

“You have to,” Azalea said. “Dad’s right. We have to go.”

With a somber look, Farley closed his eyes, and his bracelets lit with blue fire. The fire trailed slowly up the back of his arms. When he opened his bright blue eyes again, they glowed.

Picking up Aurora, he leapt high into the air. A blue crack opened in the void, and Farley was gone.

“Where is he going?” asked Evan.

“He doesn’t usually tell me.”

“Do you know what he’s doing then?”

“He’s going to get help. He thought he could hold it in the woods, but his own power wasn’t enough apparently.

“I can’t run away, Azalea.”

“Running away doesn’t have to be an act of fear. Preserve yourself, and you’ll be doing the bravest thing. Don’t go and die pointlessly.”

“But what’s going to happen to everyone?”

“It’s only after you Evan. Do you remember anything about what happened—back in the Silent Woods? When it came after us?”

“I remember it chasing us. Then it cornered us in the woods and knocked me down. I don’t remember much after that except for Farley coming and saving us.”

“What you don’t remember is that it had every opportunity to hurt me and Aurora. We stood in its way and it walked around us. I tried throwing my knives at it, but they rebounded off of it as if I had thrown them at a stone wall. And it didn’t flinch either. It just growled and continued towards you. When it nearly stood over you, ready to strike you with its claws, that’s when Dad came. Good thing too! I felt so helpless.”

“Why would Zeito send me through the woods if he knew the beast was waiting there and that it was after me?”

“I don’t know. But you know as much as I do that Zeito is worth trusting. So is Dad. We need to go to the harbor.”

Evan finally agreed. He realized that now might not be the time to face the beast, though he felt that the time would come soon. He had hoped never to see the beast after the encounter in the woods, but now it seemed inevitable.

The sky became gray in anticipation of the upcoming storm. Thunder rolled in the distance and Evan was suddenly reminded of the Silent Woods—the beat of Celeriter’s hooves in sync with the angry sky and the darkness that came quickly to overwhelm the light.

The two children stepped lightly and hurriedly, weaving their way back through the town to the Harbor. Soon they came to the edge of the port, where the barrels and crates lived. They knew they were close.

“Where did all the merchants go,” asked Azalea suddenly.

“Maybe they went home for the night.”

“All of them?”

Turning a corner, they saw a merchant standing watch with his back to them. Without realizing they were there, he turned around and his eyes widened. Azalea gasped.

“Cal?” she said with a tremor in her voice.

His lips turned pale and he sighed.

Evan had also gasped, but only because the scrawny man looked familiar to him. It was the man who had robbed him of his mother’s ring back in the woods.

“Hey! Aren’t you—” he began, but he was interrupted by Azalea’s loud huff, her confusion turning quickly to bitter anger.

“How could you leave us!” she called out, trying not to cry.

“I—” he said.

Azalea walked briskly over to him and punched him solidly in the gut. He coughed.

“Look,” he said, blocking her swings. “You shouldn’t be here! Why are you in Habbardy? With him?!”

“Why aren’t you with *us*?” she returned.

“I didn’t *choose* to leave. Dad forced me out!”

“He did not!”

“He did as soon as he decided he was going to—well, you know! I can’t believe you’re on *his* side!”

“You betrayed *him!* And *me!*”

“Look, we can’t argue about this right now. You *have to go.*”

“You’re just trying to leave me again.”

“No I’m not! There’s someone here—he’s close. And he’s looking for Evan.”

“For me?” Evan said. “Why does he want me?”

“He’s not looking to sit and have tea with you. He’s out to *kill* you.”

"I'm not leaving," Azalea said.

"And I'm not leaving until I get my mother's ring back."

"Oh yeah," said Callen. "About that."

"You said you would give it back!"

"Look, the world is a wild place. You never know—"

"Give his ring back, Cal," said Azalea.

"The thing is . . ." he said. "I don't have it anymore."

"What did you do with it?" said Evan, starting to feel angry himself.

"Well, I gave it. . . I gave it to—"

Out of the darkness and the fog, there came the sound of marching. It echoed through the harbor. An entourage of soldiers appeared. There was a tall man leading them, his armor jewel-studded and his sword gleaming through the shadows. His eyes were dark and determined.

"—I gave it to him," said Callen, and he gulped.

Chapter 25: Zander, Prince of the Third

“There’s those elusive children!” cried Aresco from among the soldiers.

“Elusive and trapidashin,” agreed Tuck.

“You buffoon! If you don’t know what a word means then don’t use it!”

“Doesn’t it mean scared?” said Tuck.

“Well—”

Zander held up a hand and they silenced. He observed Evan closely.

“You’re the Prince of the Fourth, aren’t you?”

Evan tried to stand up straighter. “Yes. I—I am.” He couldn’t help stuttering. “W-Who are you?”

“I am Zander, Prince of the Third. I’ve been sent to kill you.”

Evan’s lips turned white.

“Tell me why my father wants you dead, Prince. What has he to fear from a ten year old boy?”

“I’m thirteen.”

“There was a prophecy about you!” said Wren, emerging from the group. “It said you would inflict madness on our father.”

“I wouldn’t do that! I don’t even know how!”

“He’s lying. Kill him, Zander,” said Wren bitterly. “Unless you don’t have the guts.”

Zander looked at his bright sword. “What’s your name, Prince?”

“I am Evan, son of Alder.”

“I’m sorry Evan, but you have to die. I must obey my Father.”

“Callen?” said Azalea. “Aren’t you going to do something?”

Callen stepped back and cast his eyes to the ground. Azalea rushed suddenly towards Zander, but she was stopped by Tuck, much larger than her, who held a hand over her mouth.

Evan watched Zander walk slowly to him. Somewhere in the distance, he heard a trill. It filled him with confidence and assurance.

“Aren’t you going to run?” Zander asked.

“I’m done running.”

“You would die pointlessly?”

“Seems you don’t know what purpose means.”

“Purpose is obedience.”

“You’re right. Who do you obey?”

Zander’s cheeks flushed and it made him angry. He raised his sword to strike Evan down. But looking into his eyes, he felt that same pity that always filled him before dealing a killing blow. It was weakness. Weak! He wouldn’t be weak anymore. He would show his brother and the rest of his charge that he could do what needed to be done.

The gleam in Evan’s eyes struck him though. There was a power in his eyes that surprised him. His hold on his sword relaxed.

“Kill him!” called Wren.

Zander turned to his men. “I can’t kill someone unarmed, even if he is just a boy. This is a Prince. He deserves to die honorably.”

“Coward!” said Wren.

“Evan, Prince of the Fourth,” said Zander, “I will give you a sword and a chance to defend yourself. But don’t expect me to hold back.”

Evan looked up at the dark-eyed man challenging him to duel. He saw confusion in those eyes. And rage.

Soon Evan was given a sword. It was large and heavy. He struggled to hold it in a proper ready stance.

Zander sighed. Turning back, he saw Invictus again through the fog and felt the mountain laughing at him. Heat flushed through his body and his brows lowered. He would not hold back.

The squadron of men circled the two princes readying themselves to fight. Except for the faint lapping of waves, the harbor around them was still.

Then it began to rain. The water poured suddenly over them and drenched their hair and made it hard to see.

The rain only infuriated Zander more.

Charging at Evan, he raised his sword and yelled. Evan's breath caught in his chest and he heaved his sword up to catch the oncoming blow.

Zander lept to strike, but as he did, the edge of Evan's sword suddenly lit with purple fire and illuminated the wooden planks below his feet. Purple light glowed in his eyes. He barely lifted his sword in time.

Their swords clashed and the ringing echoed through the harbor. The blow knocked them both into the air, and they fell to the ground, eyes closed.

Chapter 26: When Dreams Collide

It was the same dream.

Every time.

It followed him during the day, and it followed him at night. It followed him when it rained, or when the sun was warm and full. It plagued him, for he knew not what it meant.

But this time something was different.

The dream hadn't come when he slept. He wasn't remembering it. He was in it.

And so was the boy-prince of the Fourth.

Zander opened his eyes to find himself once again in the field of tall grass, where the wind danced and the pine trees hugged the sky. Once again the creatures were all approaching the massive tree that burned bright with white fire.

But in this dream he turned, and Evan was there. He didn't seem afraid. Only curious, and he stared at the giant tree.

"I know this place," Evan said simply. His voice reverberated and echoed in the wind.

Zander said nothing. His heart was racing. He watched as the dream unfolded as it always did. The wounded rabbit came to the tree, found healing, and grew.

"I know how that rabbit feels," said Evan.

"How do you know this place?" asked Zander.

"I've been here before."

"Do you have this dream too?"

"This is a dream?"

"I have this dream every night." Zander's voice started to tremble. He hated that. "I can't get rid of it. This tree is constantly in my mind. But I don't know what it means."

“I went to this place. The tree wasn’t there. It was just a stump. But it healed my horse. Or the water around it did. I don’t know.”

“This tree is real?” Now Zander was shaking. He knew what was coming next.

The five men appeared, coming from four directions, and Evan gasped.

“I’ve seen that before too!”

“Seen what? Those men?”

“No. The crowns over their heads. I saw one.”

“That’s not possible.”

Then the world wobbled, and Zander found he couldn’t focus his eyes on Evan. He turned and watched again as the four men wielded the giant ax, burning with smoky black fire. He braced himself for the dream to freeze and for himself to wake.

But he didn’t.

Horror filled him as he watched the men chop at the tree. Over and over they chopped, and the great tree began to goan. The white fire in the boughs flickered and dulled.

Looking at Evan, he saw the boy was weeping.

At last, the black ax had done its work, and the trunk groaned so loudly that Zander had to cover his ears. Then panic flooded him. The trunk was leaning towards them, falling.

He watched, paralyzed, as the tree fell towards him. He turned to see Evan, who was covering his eyes, tears streaming out from under his hands.

But there was a man, glowing gold, standing behind the boy, holding him as the tree fell.

Zander cried out, but just as the massive trunk fell over him, the bark peeled off and the entire tree, trunk, boughs and all, turned to crystal white snow.

As the snow fell over him, Zander watched as Evan and the glowing man vanished in a flash of gold sparks.

Then all Zander saw was white.

When Zander pulled himself out of the snow, the field, the pine trees, the four men and their shadowy crowns—they were all gone. Instead he found himself standing before the entrance of a great stone castle, unlike any he had seen before.

It was much larger even than his father's, with turrets and walls as far as he could see—gray and lifeless.

Clouds filled the sky and covered the castle with snow. He shielded his eyes from the flakes falling all around.

On the steps of the bulky castle, leading up to its doors, there was someone sitting curled up with his face hidden in his arms. He wore a large wool coat that looked too big for him, and he held a blanket in his hands. The boy was probably not more than six years old.

Zander walked closer, soon hearing that the boy was crying.

“What’s wrong?” he asked tentatively.

The boy looked up, tears streaming down his face, hair unkempt. “I lost my brother.” Then he looked at the bright sword on Zander’s waist and the beautiful clothing he wore. “Are you one of the knights?”

Zander said nothing.

“Please help me get my brother back again,” said the boy. “He needs help.”

Zander looked around. He had no clue where he was, whether he was still dreaming, or where Evan had gone. But he looked in the boy’s eyes and saw fear and pain—familiar feelings. He nodded to the boy. “Where is he?”

“They’re hurting him,” said the boy, pointing. “In the village. Let’s go!”

The little boy grabbed Zander’s hand and held it tight. He led him towards the village, illuminated by lanterns that shone through the snowy landscape.

As soon as they came into the village, they heard laughing. Not the friendly kind. There was a crowd of young men circling up in front of someone pressed up against the wall.

“So stupid!” one was saying. “Such a baby!”

“Get him a diaper! I think he’s gonna wet himself. Look at his face!”

They were tossing a small object over their heads to each other.

“Give it back!” said a voice.

The little boy pulled on Zander’s arm. “See, they’re hurting my brother.” Zander couldn’t see the boy they were messing with, but he approached the crowd.

“Hey!” called Zander, “get off him!”

The young men quieted for a moment and the tallest of them stepped up to Zander. He was still a head shorter than Zander, but he had a huge smirk across his face. “We’re just having some fun,” he said.

“If you want to have fun, go play a game.”

“Oh, this one’s got a mouth! Now we can really have some fun.”

“Step aside.”

“Whatcha gonna do about it?”

Zander drew his sword and it gleamed in the lantern light.

“The King has rules, fool,” laughed the boy. “You’re not gonna hurt us.”

“I’m not from around here. And I don’t like to obey orders.”

The bully looked Zander in the eyes and saw he was serious. He dropped the object in the snow. Once he ran, then the rest followed. The little boy stepped through the snow to his brother who had his face up against the wall.

“It’s ok,” the little boy said. “The knight saved you.” His brother turned and wiped at his tears.

Zander drew in a quick breath. The boy . . . he felt like he was looking in a mirror. He had dark eyes and hair like Zander, and the same nose, but he was very skinny, his cheek bones poking out, and his arms thin as twigs. He was wearing a soldier’s chestplate, far too big for him.

“Thank you for helping me, knight,” the boy said. “I’m Darian. Perhaps you know me?”

Zander said nothing. *His father?*

“Did they break your machine?” said the little boy, picking up the small object.

“Alder, it’s not a machine, it’s a music box.”

“Well you made it, so—” said Alder, trailing off.

“Looks like they didn’t break it.”

The two boys looked up at Zander, who was staring with wide eyes.

“Would you like to hear the song it plays?” said Darian.

After a moment, Zander nodded. Darian twisted the lever on the little box, and let it unwind. In the silence of the snow, a simple melody played, light and airy, like a choir of mouse-sized bells.

“It’s very nice,” said Zander at last as the song ended. “I’m sorry those boys hurt you.”

“It’s ok. People only hurt other people when they’re hungry. They call *me* Darian the Hungry cause I’m skinny! Ha! They’re the ones that need food. Someday, Alder, I’ll build something that will make all the hunger go away. You’ll see.”

“Build it quickly please,” said Alder.

Darian looked at Zander, then at his music box.

“Here,” he said. “You can have it. Thank you for helping me.”

When Darian placed the music box in Zander’s hand, the dream began to wobble and flicker, and the village seemed to fade away into darkness. Stars appeared, and dotted the blackness all around him.

But Darian and Alder were still there. They were aging before his eyes.

Zander watched as the stars began to spin around him, white blurs orbiting rapidly. And Darian and Alder grew into adults, taller than Zander, with proud eyes. In the echoing space, he heard them talking.

“How will you not join me?” said Darian furiously. “It’s what you always wanted. I built it *for* you.”

“That’s not what I wanted at all,” said Alder. A little boy ran up behind Alder.

“Look at him!” Darian said. “That was you, once. Remember what it used to be like. Father gave us nothing. We were princes but we starved. Don’t do the same to your own son, Alder.”

“Don’t bring Evan into this. I’ll find my own way, but what you have built—it’s not right.”

Zander stared at the tall men who once looked like little boys: Darian and Alder, Kings of the Third and Fourth Quadrants.

And Evan . . . son of Alder.

Zander tried to ask a question, but his vision blurred and before he knew it he found himself on his back soaking wet on the docks of Habbardy.

In his hand was a music box.

Chapter 17: The Clashing of Conscience

Zander rolled painfully to his hands and knees. What had he just seen? Alder, the King of the Fourth, was his father's brother. His own uncle.

Zander looked through the rain and saw Evan still sprawled out on the ground, unconscious. The soldiers around them were in the same place as before, watching eagerly as if nothing had happened, like his dream had lasted mere moments.

But the boy—Alder's son? Darian had sent him to kill his own cousin?

At first he thought the dream was a lie. But in his hand was a music box—there was no way the dream was a lie. He put the music box in his satchel.

"Kill him!" shouted Wren from among the soldiers. "Get back up and do what we came to do!"

Zander grabbed his sword from where it had fallen and stood. He pushed his wet hair out of his eyes.

"Kill him," shouted Wren again.

But Zander just stood there. He couldn't. He wouldn't. He had done many things for his father before, following him blindly, but he knew this was wrong. Evan had done nothing. And he was . . . family.

Wren yelled furiously and rushed out, brandishing his sword. "Fine! I'll do it then!"

But his sword was stopped. Zander stood in the way.

Wren's eyes widened for a moment, then grew bright, infuriated.

"I knew it!" he yelled. "Coward!" Then Wren began swinging his sword with great ferocity and speed. Zander caught each one in determined silence.

"Coward!" he said again. "You'd fight your own brother rather than obey your father?"

"I can't kill him," said Zander. "He's—"

"I don't care!" shouted Wren. He hacked his sword, swinging it up and down, trying to penetrate Zander's defensive stance.

Blow after blow landed on Zander's sword. Though the rain continued to fall, sparks burst from the edges of their blades.

"Why won't you just obey?" said Wren again. "Why won't you just *follow*?"

The ringing of their strikes echoed through the thrum of the rain.

"Get out of my way!"

At last Zander swung his sword in a quick arc, loosing Wren's sword from his hands. The blade clattered to the ground. Zander kicked his brother, who fell to the ground.

The ferocity in Wren's eyes dimmed.

But before Zander could do anything, or Wren could say anything, all were silenced at the sound of a low growl rumbling through the rain.

Chapter 18: The Shadow Beast

The growling filled the atmosphere and crawled through the air. All trembled. All were quiet.

Everyone looked, peering into the rain, trying to find where the sound was coming from.

Zander paled.

There on a nearby building, a great bulk of shadowy mass perched silently on the eaves of the roof. It was watching them.

From its silhouette, outlined by flashing lightning, Zander could see the points of its ears, the long tail curling up into the dark, and its arched back.

As soon as it saw that they had noticed its presence, it snarled, white fangs gleaming through the rain. It moved its massive body and claws scraped against the tiles. Then it leapt down like a tiger approaching its prey—soundlessly, viciously, determinedly.

It landed on the wooden dock and the harbor shook.

No one moved.

Zander watched it silently stalk its way towards them, stopping in front of him.

Then it growled, and a voice filled the silence. It was slow and rough like gravel, deep and prolonged, as a wounded man would talk. A wounded man content with his own wounds. Everyone on the dock heard the words, but only in their minds, for the speaker never opened its mouth.

Kedha . . . I—am—Kedha, said the beast.

For a moment, Evan was awake, but his vision was blurry. He felt the rain pounding down on him, getting into his eyes. He tried to wipe at them, but it didn't help much. Looking out into the dark and the rain, he saw Zander, the prince that had fought him, and who had joined him in a dream.

He saw Zander standing before the beast from the Silent Woods, bright white eyes bulging. Yet somehow the beast was not the same. The one he had

seen before was smaller and stayed low to the ground like a lizard. This was that beast, but it had huge hulking muscles, and it stood proudly like a wolf. It stared at Zander.

Evan glanced around. The whole harbor was filled with mist. It trailed around him and pooled around Zander's legs. The soldiers around them were terrified. Some curled up on the ground, others ran away. But Evan saw mist streaming out of them and pouring into the beast.

Evan took one last look at Zander and watched him glance back. The beast growled viciously, and Zander readied himself to fight.

Step—aside, human. I care—nothing for—you.

Zander wasn't looking at the beast anymore. He was looking back over his shoulder at the helpless boy on the docks.

He had been given the sword in his hand by his father. A merciless thing, meant to strike down anyone that tried to cross his path. It was a weapon of destruction—designed to cause pain.

Zander looked out into the distance to find Invictus, his father's mountain. It had taunted him and showered doubt upon him. It made him feel as defenseless as Evan was, lying there. He waited for it to call him *weak*.

But the rain was heavy, and it shielded him from the mountain.

Zander took a deep breath and looked the beast in the eyes. It was so close now, those white soulless eyes staring at him with terrifying ferocity.

He never wanted to be a soldier. But maybe—just once—in spite of his father's intentions, he could be a protector.

Then light was born in the darkness. A gentle white flame appeared on his blade and wrapped around it like a vine.

At the sight of the white light, the beast visibly shuddered. Roaring, it rose up like a great bear to slash its claws at Zander.

It crashed down on Zander, and his blade like white lightning caught the claws overhead. The great paw was bigger than Zander himself, but the sword

held new power that he didn't expect. He pushed against it, holding the claws like an umbrella over his head.

The beast reeled and roared again. Pulling back, it slashed over and over. Zander blocked each one, and the white fire danced.

The assault was getting more powerful. Zander stole a glance around him. His men had run away. Azalea was squatting by Evan's sprawled out body with a fiery look in her eyes. Wren was still there too, standing paralyzed with fear, looking much like his father had in his dream.

He had looked for too long. The beast smashed its claws down, and Zander dove, barely dodging their strike. He rolled back up to his knee and caught another attack.

Ducking a side-sweep, he stood, spun around, and struck at the beast's face. He nearly missed, but the white fire cut across its face and it felt the heat.

More angry than ever before, the monster thundered and with all its force, beat down on Zander. He caught the blow, but the pure force knocked his sword far away, clattering on the dock.

Zander stumbled back. He looked up at the beast. It knew it had beat him, growling happily.

But in the last moments before the massive creature struck Zander down, he looked into its pale eyes and felt strong. He didn't feel afraid. He felt . . . like himself.

It drew up its claws and struck.

But Zander didn't take the blow.

Wren stood now between his brother and the beast and swung the white sword effortlessly. The sword was now completely in flames and the whole harbor was illuminated.

Zander was in awe at his brother spinning the sword around him, a propellor of white fire, knocking back the beast.

Wren cut at the beast and fire arced in wide circles, pushing the beast toward the water. Spinning, Wren slashed and the white fire burned its face. It

roared and smashed the sword so powerfully that the sword shattered in pieces, scattering across the harbor.

The beast gurgled with pain. Those pale eyes were burned shut. In its blindness, it swiped and caught Wren with its claws. Wren flew across the dock and slammed against the wall of a building, crumpling to the floor.

The beast scratched at its eyes. It howled and dove, swimming away into the Nebo Kalim.

Chapter 29: Truth and Legacy

Zander held his brother and tried to listen to his raspy breathing through the heavy rain. Wren's eyes were closed, water streaming down his face. He tried to shield him with his body.

He wasn't crying, but he was thankful for the rain, providing plenty of tears for him. Then Wren smirked weakly, eyes still closed.

"You know," he said, taking a breath. "You have a lot of pressure on your shoulders."

"What are you talking about?" said Zander.

"Father. Father puts a lot of pressure on you. I know."

"What?"

Wren chuckled painfully. "I pay more attention than you think."

"You didn't have to save me from that thing."

"Yes I did." Then he sighed. "Father never wanted me to come on the mission. He said I would be a distraction to you. And I mean—he was right. I'm sorry I was hard on you. Sometimes I'm just jealous."

"Jealous of what?" Zander laughed, but it hurt.

"Jealous cause you seem to always have the ability and willpower to determine what's right and do it, no matter what anyone says. No matter what Father threatens. I wish I had that strength."

"Wren . . ."

"No—I'm not done. Zander, you are the high prince of the Third Quadrant. You have a chance to redefine our legacy. To figure out what's right, and do it."

"I don't know—"

"Yes you can." Wren coughed. "You try not to show it, but you care about truth very deeply. Don't lose that part of yourself."

"Wren?"

"Hm?"

"I wish I hadn't ignored you as often as I did."

“Nah, you never offended me. I always looked up to you. And you took it from Father too, so I knew you understood me. I believe in you Zander.” Wren stopped and winced. “I—love you.”

Wren smiled and coughed again. But he said nothing more, and Zander held him close as a few minutes later, he breathed his last.

Azalea had been crouched, knives out, by Evan, still unconscious, as the beast dove into the sea. As soon as it hit the water the rain intensified, and the sound of the droplets hitting the wooden docks echoed underneath them and blotted out all other noise.

And so, she couldn't hear Zander as he cried, sitting by his brother. She only saw his shoulders shaking.

Chapter 30: The Soft-Spoken Star

It rained for an hour after the breath left Wren's body. Brutal rain. Bitter rain. But soon the downpour ceased and the clouds began to part. The mountain, Invictus, showed itself again in the moonlight. It was silent.

Callen rose from behind a crate where he was watching. He saw Zander kneeling beside Wren and sighed, putting his head in his hands. Another life taken. Another soul claimed by the beast. It made him sick to think of it.

But more than that, he felt sick to think of what he had done—what he did when he saw those eyes bulging and peering into the night. As soon as he saw the shadow of the thing up on the rooftop, he did what he had sworn he would never do.

He ran.

But now he saw his little sister, crouching fiercely over Evan, the boy she had sworn to protect, and he felt jealous of her determination—her unswerving passion to the mission she had been tasked to do.

He pulled himself out of his hiding place and headed towards her.

She caught him in the corner of her eye and almost hissed.

"Stay back!" she called.

"Azalea, it's ok. The beast is gone."

"I know it is."

"Alright then. Calm down."

"No."

"Why not?"

"I don't trust you."

"I'm your brother, Azalea, I'm not going to hurt you."

"You betrayed me once. How do I know you're not going to do it again?"

Then from across the dock they heard the heavy thudding footsteps of the Prince of the Third. They were slow and weary footsteps.

Azalea raised her knives at the sight of Zander.

"Stay *back!*" she said through her teeth.

Zander said nothing for a moment. His head hung low. Then he spoke.

“Will you help me bury my brother?”

Callen’s eyes flickered. The stern, confident soldier he had traveled with was gone. Now before him he saw a beat down prince trying hard to make it look like he hadn’t been crying. He glanced at Azalea, who seemed to have relaxed.

She looked back at him, her eyebrows raising, seeming to say, *answer him!*

Callen swallowed and then scratched the back of his head.

“Sure. Yes,” he said.

“Callen will help you,” said Azalea. “I’m staying with Evan.”

Zander nodded.

Following Zander’s quiet and simple guidance, Callen helped him carry Wren’s body to the boat they had arrived in, still tied to the docks. Zander spent several minutes in the boat with his brother, laying Wren’s sword in his hands and covering him with a cloak left behind.

Getting out of the boat, Zander pushed it out into the currents of the Nebo Kalim.

Silently, he picked up a bow laying against a nearby pillar.

“Light an arrow,” he said. Callen took a moment to relight the flame in the pillar. He picked up an arrow and let it catch with bright light. He held it up in the darkness. The sky wasn’t as black as it had once been. It was turning gray.

The sun was approaching.

While Callen had been working on starting the fire, Zander was watching the boat drift off into the sea. He watched the waves as they rolled, gently lifting the boat up and down. Such a peaceful moment for the chaos the night had been.

“Give the arrow to me,” he said. Callen did.

Zander nocked the flaming arrow and took a deep breath. As he pulled back on the drawstring, he looked out across the sea and saw the mountain staring at him.

It said nothing. It only glared.

Zander's eyes filled with tears and his vision blurred. He blinked hard to make the pain go away, but it only made it worse.

Aiming the arrow up at the mountain's peak, he let it fly into the air. It sailed high and the flame cast an orange glow over the water.

Zander exhaled. The arrow hit the boat, and it caught on fire.

The bonfire was huge and Invictus glowered down upon it. It still said nothing.

Callen and Zander watched it burn until it finally sank, and the flames were no more.

"At least now," said Zander, "he'll know how deep the water goes."

Shivering he tried to fight back the tears.

Soon, he felt a warmth on the back of his neck. A gold light broke over the waves, casting long shadows.

The sun was rising.

Zander turned and saw the bright edge of the dawn gleaming over Habbardy's rooftops. He stood there and watched it as it lifted itself up into the sky out of the bitter night and restored its place in the heavens.

The tears in his eyes flowed freely now. He felt so confused. So inadequate. So hopeless. But at least for now the sun was warm. The darkness of the night was sharp like the blade of his father, but the light of the dawn was gentle.

He missed his brother. But at least for now, the sun was warm, and at least for now, its light spoke gentle things. At least for now, it was here and the night had gone away.

You, sun, are a soft-spoken star, he thought. Teach me how you overcome the night.

Chapter 31: Cave Shadows

For several moments, Callen and Azalea had waited while they watched the Prince of the Third stare quietly out at the water.

Azalea jabbed Callen with her elbow.

“Ow!”

“Say something,” she whispered.

“Just give him a moment!” he whispered back, holding his bruised side where she had jabbed him.

“You’re just afraid. As always.”

“Look, I’m trying to think of him.”

“Thinking of someone else? That’s new.”

Callen glared and said nothing.

The silence was broken when Zander turned. His eyes were solemn.

“We need to go,” he said. “It’s not safe here.”

“We?” said Callen. “Since when are we working together? You forced me here.”

“Callen!” said Azalea.

“No you’re right,” said Zander. “And I’m sorry for that. But my purposes have changed now.”

“He did protect Evan,” said Azalea, looking at her brother.

“Whatever the case,” said Zander, “I want to keep Evan alive. I assume you both do too?”

Azalea nodded. Callen sighed. “Yes, we do.”

“Where’s somewhere safe we can go—outside the city? The beast will be coming back. It’s not safe here.”

“We could go back to our house,” said Azalea.

“No. We can’t,” said Callen, “It’s not safe there.”

“Yes it is—”

“We *can’t*.”

Azalea caught the message and stopped.

“Well,” said Callen, “I do have a place we can go. It’s a cave up in the hills toward the castle. Just outside the city.”

“That will work,” said Zander.

“A *cave*?” said Azalea, a disgusted look on her face.

“Yes, a cave,” said Callen. “You have a problem with caves?”

“Cal *please* don’t tell me that you’ve been living in a cave since you left.”

“Look, I’m a practical guy. It’s tucked away where no one—no beast—can find it. It’s spacious. Uh, and it has good air circulation.”

“You’ve really been by yourself in a cave?”

“Well no. I haven’t been alone.”

“Living with the bears then.”

“No bears, Azalea,” said Callen, rolling his eyes. “There’s actually a whole group of us living in the cave systems there.”

“Will they be ok with us coming there?” asked Zander.

“Of course! They kind of look to me for leadership.”

“*You?*” asked Azalea.

“Well I—I rescued them. They were lost. In the woods. And I brought them out. Most of them were affected by the rain long enough that they don’t remember much of their pasts.”

Azalea said nothing to this, but she only looked at her brother curiously.

Zander walked to the pile of shards that had once been his sword. The sword that had lit with white fire. Even the hilt of the sword had broken in two.

But he noticed something unusual. Among the shards there was a small stone, smoothed down so that it was nearly a perfect sphere. And a little white flame danced around it, almost imperceptibly. He reached for it. As soon as he was about to touch it, the flame rose and wrapped around his finger. It didn’t burn.

What was this doing in his sword? As he put it in his satchel, a great splash of the harbor waves reminded him of the urgent need to leave.

With some caution, he approached Evan. Azalea stiffened but she seemed to know what he was doing.

Zander bent down and lifted Evan gently in his arms. Someone would have to carry him, and Zander was by far the strongest.

Evan's face was calm and undisturbed. He lay in Zander's arms almost lifelessly, but he was breathing deep and evenly.

Zander could hardly believe that he had gone so quickly from leading a team of men to kill a thirteen year old to wanting to protect him. He thought again of the dream, their fathers arguing and Evan, as an even younger and even smaller kid, hiding behind King Alder's leg.

Following Callen, they journeyed out of Habbardy. The city was even quieter than before. No one was watching the gate. Soon enough Callen led them off the path, heading to the base of a hill covered with trees much like the pines that filled the Silent Woods.

"Come on," he said. "It's just at the top of this hill."

Zander sighed. Carrying Evan had felt like nothing at first, but he fully expected Evan to feel more like a bag of bricks by the time they reached the top of the hill.

"Is there anywhere else we can go?" he asked. "Somewhere lower—not up a hill?"

"No, we have to go here," said Callen. "You've trusted me to lead you this far. This is the safest place we can go."

Zander nodded and braced himself.

Callen led them up and around huge boulders and steep slopes. Eventually, they came to a landing, and even Azalea was huffing.

"You might—" she said, breathing heavily, "consider adding in some stairs."

"Look, I'm going for subtlety here."

"Could you have at least been subtle a little lower down?"

"Of course not! It's always better to be higher up, cause then I can see what's coming. See, turn around."

Azalea and Zander turned. From their place on the hill, there was an opening in the trees through which they could see the gate of Habbardy and the Silent Woods.

“If the beast is coming, I’ll know.”

At the back of the landing, set into the side of the hill, was the opening to a great cave. Callen strode eagerly towards it, his face jovial and excited.

“Hey everyone! I’m back!” he called towards the cave. “I know I was gone for a while but I got caught up...” Suddenly his voice faded away and he stood still at the entrance to the cave. Azalea and Zander followed.

The cave was empty. Except for some crates and supply barrels that had been smashed and scattered, there was nothing to be found.

“What happened?” asked Azalea, wondering out loud.

Callen’s lips were pale. He stood there, blinking coldly.

Zander walked inside and lay Evan down on the cave floor. He set his satchel against the wall.

“They’re all gone,” Callen said, his head drooping. “I tried to stop it from getting to them.” He began wandering around the cave, picking up scraps and setting turned over wooden chairs upright. “I was trying to protect them.”

Azalea watched her brother. As much as she was angry with him for leaving them, she hated to see him so distraught. She ran over to him and gave him a hug.

“It’s ok, Cal. You tried your hardest.”

Callen sighed.

“And I don’t know why you left us but I’m glad you’re with me now.”

Then Cal hugged her back.

“As safe as this place seems,” said Zander, “if the beast has been here before then it will come back.”

“It’s hunting Evan too,” said Azalea. “It has some sort of mark on him.”

“Ok, we can rest here for today, but we can head out tomorrow and find somewhere better to hide.”

“We can’t hide forever,” said Zander. “Especially if it’s looking for us.”

Callen took a breath. “You’re right.”

“What do we do?” asked Azalea.

“I don’t know. But it’s been a long few days. And it’s already the afternoon. Let’s rest.”

“I’ll build a fire,” said Azalea.

“No, don’t! It’ll be able to see us better.”

“A fire is fine,” said Zander. “The beast is blind now.”

“Blind?”

Zander said nothing. Azalea went out into the woods collecting firewood, and Callen finished straightening up the cave.

Zander took the small smooth stone out of his bag and it lit on fire when he held it. He sat next to Evan and watched it glow.

Soon Azalea returned and quickly started a small fire at the entrance of the cave. From the supplies left among the crates and barrels, Callen found enough food to make dinner: fish and berries. He cooked the fish over Azalea’s fire and they all ate eagerly. Zander brought Evan closer to the fire.

After their meal, Callen left the fire and went into the cave. He sat in the middle of the cave floor with his back to the entrance, watching Azalea and Zander’s shadows leap and jump in the firelight against the wall. He sat there for a long time, quietly, thinking.

Soon the wind increased and the clouds covered the sun. In his unconscious state, Evan shivered. Zander saw that his face was pale and a gray bruise showed over his temple.

“Azalea, there’s a cloak in my satchel. Will you get it out for Evan? It’s leaning up against the wall of the cave.”

Azalea nodded and left up.

Running over to the bag at the back of the cave, she opened it up and dug inside.

Callen watched her rummaging.

Grabbing the cloak in the bag, she pulled it. There was a clicking sound, and a thud. All eyes turned and looked.

“Is that—” Callen began, “Evan’s ring? You still have it?”

Zander rose quickly. “What else would I have done with it? Throw it into the sea?”

“And what’s this? It’s so pretty!” said Azalea, picking up the second item: a wooden music box.

“Don’t touch that!” said Zander. Azalea had already begun turning the little handle. The music echoed into the cave.

Almost immediately as the music had begun, Zander stiffened. His eyes closed and he fell to the cave floor.

Chapter 32: Galaxy Eyes

When Evan's sword struck Zander's and the blow knocked him back, he watched as Habbardy, the harbor, and all the soldiers crowded around him disappeared.

He soon found himself in a dark wood, with massive pine trees surrounding him. Azalea was several feet ahead, crouching with her back turned to him and her knives readied, glimmering. Aurora was there, hiding behind her sister.

Evan walked toward her, fallen pine needles swishing as if imitating the sound of the breeze.

"Azalea?" he asked. His voice echoed.

She glanced over her shoulder at him. Her eyes were wide, and her lips were pale.

There was a burst of darkness, and Evan was alone. Azalea and Aurora were gone, and even the trees seemed to have backed away. But Evan knew where he was. He remembered this place. This horrid, dark place. He was in the Silent Woods.

Bright white orbs appeared in the blackness ahead of him, staring at him. Evan trembled. Turning, he ran, but the darkness seemed to grow blacker and the pine needles filled to his ankles.

The beast stalked towards him. Evan cried out, covering his eyes, as the beast lifted a heavy claw to strike.

But suddenly he was back again, standing behind Azalea and Aurora. The beast was gone, or at least, back among the trees.

Azalea turned again, looking at him, and again she disappeared.

This time, as his vision flashed, a new figure appeared as the beast's death-white eyes began to glow again through the trees.

It was Farley.

"Evan," he said. "Breathe."

The beast didn't seem to notice him there. It crawled out from among the trees as it had done just a moment earlier. Evan's heart raced.

"Farley, help," he whispered, breathless.

"Breathe, Evan."

Again the beast pounced and Evan curled up. But before the beast could strike, the vision restarted, and he was there again waiting for the beast to emerge.

Farley was there too.

"Evan," he said. "The beast lives on fear. It *feeds* on it. Take its power away."

"I—I can't," Evan said. His eyes flicked all around the woods. He felt like he couldn't focus; he couldn't breathe. Cold ran up and down his spine. He saw a cloud of mist pouring out of him and flowing out of the woods, filling the ground, spiraling into the beast.

"Yes you can, Evan. It has power only if you give it power."

"H—how. W-what."

"Hold your stone, Evan. The strength of the Kingfisher is in it."

Evan grasped the stone hanging from the chain around his neck. It felt warm.

Still, the beast pounced again and Evan's whole body trembled.

"Evan," said Farley. "Focus on the beast and you give your fear a place to grow. Focus on living things. Beautiful things. Find the Kingfisher, Evan."

In a secluded area of the woods nearby, another figure appeared.

Zander lifted himself out of a pile of pine needles and dusted himself off. It was dark, but the moon was bright, shining through the trees, and fireflies floated around him. As he stood, he noticed a pool of water beside him. He looked into the pool and saw himself. But it wasn't his reflection. He saw himself asleep on the floor of the cave where he fell.

He looked around and soon heard voices in the distance.

"Yes you can, Evan," he heard. "It has power only if you give it power."

Zander hid behind a tree, and saw the clearing where Evan stood, grasping the stone hanging from his neck. He was sweating. An older man stood nearby, wearing four bracelets that glowed with blue light.

Then Zander saw the shadowy beast creeping out of the woods. He gasped and started to go to Evan—to help him. A hand caught his shoulder, stopping him.

“Not yet,” said a voice. Zander turned and he shivered at the sight of the crazy mystic that had once struck down the doors of his father’s fortress—the one who had brought the prophecy that started all of this. But Zander almost didn’t recognize him. His cloak was clean instead of singed, and his hair was pure white.

“Now is not the time to interfere with Evan’s dream,” said the old man.

“Evan’s dream? I thought I was dreaming.”

“You are. But this is not *your* dream. Do you realize what you’re doing right now?”

“I’m—I don’t know, I’m talking to you.”

“You’re dream-walking.”

“Dream-walking?”

“You’ve entered into Evan’s dream.”

“How did I do that? All I remember is hearing music and then falling asleep.”

“The stone in your hand holds great power. The Kingfisher has chosen you to wield it, Zander, in the least metaphorical sense.”

“The Kingfisher?”

“It’s his power flowing through the stone you used to get here.”

Zander looked and realized his hand was clenched tightly around the stone he had found in the hilt of his sword. And bright white fire encapsulated his hand, though it did not burn.

“The white fire?”

“His. Ah! Look,” said the old man, pointing over his shoulder.

Zander looked back at Evan, who was still looping through the same encounter with the beast. His shoulders were slumped and his body trembled.

“If you focus on the beast,” Zander heard Evan’s companion say, “you give your fear a place to grow. Focus on living things. Beautiful things. Find the Kingfisher, Evan. Breathe, Evan. Freedom is closer than you think.”

The beast was once again crawling out of the woods. This time, however, Zander watched as Evan took a long deep breath, staring at the beast in his wide bright eyes. Then he looked up, past the beast, into the swaying pine trees. Zander looked with him.

Stars filled the sky behind the trees, a galaxy of color swirling just above the darkness. And trilling through the silence was a small blue bird with fire on its chest. The bird surprised Zander. As soon as he heard it calling, the sound of its song filled his ears and he wondered how he hadn’t heard it before.

He looked to Evan, who stared intently at the blue bird while holding tightly onto his stone. There was a glow, and a gentle, purple flame lit and surrounded his hand. It spiraled up his arm and wrapped around his chest. Evan didn’t seem to notice.

The beast had stopped in front of Evan. In comparison to the Kingfisher’s song, and the galaxy that swirled around it, the beast’s eyes now seemed sickly, dark, and dim. It held itself close to the ground and cried out in pain. It began to claw at its eyes and ears, roaring.

Evan watched the bird and listened to its song. He felt the warmth of the stone. Everything around him seemed to fade away. And lilting among and around the song, he heard his mother’s voice, whispering, “Well done, Evan. Keep watching, Evan. The strength of El Roi is with you.”

Bravery and power filled him. The purple fire grew and began to pour out of his right hand. It grabbed onto an invisible mold and shaped itself into the form of a sword.

Evan felt it in his hand. It was light as air, yet firm and balanced. The fire wrapped around his arm but it didn’t burn. It only glowed. He stared into the beast’s eyes and he saw something new.

Hesitation.

And yet, looking at his sword, he knew that it didn't come from himself. He had envisioned it, but the power was not his. It was born of the Kingfisher's strength in the wake of new trust in the song resounding in his ears. The Kingfisher's song had grown and become a symphony, playing in his head a tune to the words of the story his father used to tell:

Whom the Green-born King shall instruct
Shall be a fitter king than most,
For He who holds heaven's jewel shall entrust
The earth to one whose heart shall never boast.

And now Evan heard old lines that he had forgotten, but that had been stored away in his heart for the proper time:

The one who gazes with galaxy eyes
Knows the galaxy's creator.
Sweet Life is born and Cruel Death dies
In sight of the King Ressurector.

Zander watched Evan and saw him begin to glow, captivated by the bird flying among the stars. But the beast still stood before him. It was clawing at itself now, roaring fiercely, fighting through an invisible barrier. It was inching towards Evan.

"Zander," said the old man. "The power of the Dream-Walker is to aid the dreamer in conquering his dream. Your power and his must join together."

"How?"

"Do what he does. Now is a critical moment, Zander. Evan's soul is hanging in the balance."

"But it's just a dream."

The old man's eyes lit and he looked closely at Zander. "You know as I do. That's not true."

Zander looked back at Evan. He was focused on the Kingfisher, but the beast continued to claw closer.

“Evan is not strong enough,” said the old man, “to hold the beast on his own, and it is not yet the Kingfisher’s time.”

“What do I do?”

“Now Zander!” said the old man.

But Zander woke up.

Chapter 33: Dream-Walkers

“Zander! Zander!” Azalea was whispering aggressively. “Wake up! Wa—ke u—p!”

Zander woke and sat straight up. “What’s wrong,” he said loudly.

“Quiet! The beast is coming! It’s searching the trees. You *need* to go.”

“Wait I—”

“Don’t worry, Callen’s keeping watch. Just outside the cave. Look, you need to take Evan. Not sure I trust you yet but this is your chance. There’s a hole in the back of the cave over there that leads to a tunnel.”

“Azalea, no you don’t understand—”

“Callen and I are going to try and create a distraction while you leave and I have *no* idea where you should go, but you better figure it out cause I’m not gonna—”

“Stop! Wait! I *have* to go back in.”

“Go back in? Go where?”

“The dream. Evan’s in trouble. I’m needed there. I need to go back.”

“What are you talking about, Zander?”

“Just—just play that music box again.”

“Is that gonna knock you out again? Cause we don’t have the time—”

“Do it, Azalea!”

Azalea picked it up and turned the lever. The music played, and Zander was asleep once again.

When Zander opened his eyes, he was standing in a wide open space, completely dark. He couldn’t see Evan or the beast anymore.

Below him, there was a shallow pool of water over the surface of that deep darkness, and in the reflection Zander saw himself asleep and sprawled out on the floor of the cave.

A deep urgency galloped within him, like the soul of a stallion, rushing through windy plains on a mission greater than its own.

There was a glimmer of purple and white light in the distance.

He began to sprint through the trees and darkness. There he found Evan again, but the old man was gone. Evan's eyes were upward, but the beast had its jaws open, pushing through invisible winds that blew its gross fur back.

"Evan!" he called out. Evan didn't seem to notice him, but he held a bright purple sword in the air. Suddenly, a ball of purple flame appeared on the tip of the sword and it flew in the air like a lightning bug. The flame buried itself in the ground just in front of the beast, making the dirt glow with purple light.

The purple glow only infuriated the beast further. It began to thrash its head, pushing itself closer and closer to Evan and snapping its jaws. Just as the beast was nearly in range of Evan, the old man appeared again in Zander's view. He closed his eyes and gold sparks erupted from the edges of his cloak and it caught with gold fire. Yellow and gold light lit around him and rivers of gold light poured around the trees.

The dream stopped. Evan's sword remained in the air, purple sparks frozen as if in a spiderweb of time. The beast paused in the middle of thrashing its huge head, but Zander and the old man were unaffected.

"What's happening?" asked Zander.

"For the Dream-walker, every dream is alive," said the old man, his eyes sparkling with gold light. "Like a creature with thoughts and emotions. They are born within the heart of the dreamer, but they are servants of the Kingfisher himself."

"Why—"

"Dreams are critical, Zander. The moment was almost lost, but I paused it so you can know."

"Know what? How are you doing this?"

"I should introduce myself. My name is Zeito. Like you, I am a Dream-Walker of the order of the Kingfisher. Zander, every dream is alive. And this one has something very important it wants to tell you."

Chapter 34: Shadow Rising

“Callen!” Azalea whispered through her teeth. “Cal!” She was tip toeing through the woods outside the cave. “Where are you?”

The air seemed to be thickening, and an eerie wind blew up the hillside.

“Callen!” she whispered again. Then she felt a hand over her mouth and gasped. But it was Callen. His hand was very cold.

He pulled her behind a tree and took his hand off her mouth. But he put a finger to his lips. Then he said, almost silently. “You must not be afraid, Azalea. Remember what dad taught us.” She nodded.

Then he pointed around the tree. She felt her breath quicken. There, near the base of the hill, was the beast. It was wandering in its blindness, bumping into trees. But it was moving quickly, angrily, fiercely. Steadily, it made its way closer and closer to the cave.

“Did you tell Zander?” whispered Callen.

Azalea nodded. “He knows. But he made me put him to sleep again. Using the music box.”

“What?”

“He said he needed to protect Evan.”

“How is that protecting Evan?”

“Don’t look at me! I don’t know!”

“Shh! You’re being too loud!”

“No you are!”

“Look, either way, we need to keep the beast from finding them.”

“What do we do?”

“I don’t know. I don’t know.”

“Well figure something out please!”

“I don’t *know!*” said Callen a little too loudly. He clapped his hand over his mouth and they looked to the beast.

It cocked its head.

Chapter 35: An Ocean of Color

Zeito had his hands on Zander's shoulders. All over his arms and in his eyes, gold fire danced.

"Take a deep breath, Zander. You must humble yourself. Allow the dream to penetrate you! Let it seep into you."

"How?"

"Accept who you are. Don't be ashamed. Then focus your energy on someone else."

Zander thought about the mountain, laughing at him. He imagined it calling him weak. It was staring down at him in the boat. But then he took a deep breath and saw the stone in his hand, with the fire seeming to hug his arm. *It's only weakness if you believe it to be*, said the friendly fire.

Then he thought of his brother. He saw Wren in the boat again, carving at his wooden bear. Oh, the questions he had. The confusion. He wished he could go back and comfort his brother. To tell him that he was loved and that everything would be ok.

It was too late for that now, but he saw Evan and saw his brother. He saw family. The beast was frozen mid attack. *Born to protect*, said the fire. *Born to believe. Born to be free.*

Suddenly the dream pooled into an ocean of colors and sound, swirling beneath his feet. Zeito was gone. Evan and the beast were gone. But the dream was alive. A trilling rang in his ears.

Images flashed before him. He saw himself floating over Habbardy, then across the plains, hills, and woods. He sailed through the wind and flew through the walls of a great castle. Inside, the dream brought him to a throne where there was a King, crying with his face in his hands. His crown was on the ground.

It was Alder, King of the Fourth. Evan's father.

There was a bright flashing, and a picture of Evan appeared. Then the weeping King took his head out of his hands. He wasn't crying any more.

Zander watched him leap out of his throne, burst open the doors of the great hall, and rush outside the building.

The dream flashed again.

Now King Alder was on a midnight stallion, speeding away from the castle.

The clouds swirled above him, startled. The wind increased and flicked the King's hair around his face.

Then it began to rain.

Zander gasped and found himself again with Zeito.

"Very good," said Zeito. He was smiling. "You must bring Evan to him. Bring Evan to Alder, Zander. I'll hold the dream for you."

Zander nodded, feeling heat coursing through him.

Sparks rose around him, and he woke.

Chapter 36: Traps and Tangled Truth

Callen and Azalea held their breath and stayed as still as they possibly could. They watched as the beast resumed its blind hunt. It was crawling its way towards the cave.

“Cal, it’s going to find Evan soon.”

“I know. We don’t have much time.”

“What do we do? I wish Father were here.”

Callen chuckled softly. “Father? He wouldn’t help.”

“You don’t know that.”

“Look, look. Here’s an idea.”

Azalea huffed. “What?”

“What if—” said Callen, pausing. “We draw it into a trap. I have some nearby from when I lived here.”

“Are you *crazy*?”

“You got any better ideas.”

“Well no.” Then she took a deep breath. “Fine.”

“We’ll need someone to lure it in. You wait here and I’ll draw it in.”

“No way!”

“What?”

“You’re awful at running away, Callen. I’d beat you in a race anyday. I’ll draw it in.”

“Father would kill me if I let you do that.”

“*Now* you care about what he thinks?”

“I’ve always cared, Azalea.”

“Then *why* did you run away?”

“Father forced me out!”

“He did not! I don’t believe it. You can’t convince me.”

“I thought you knew.”

“Knew what, Callen?” she said, adopting a sarcastic tone. “That Father’s secretly evil?” She suppressed a laugh.

“Yes!”

“Come on, Callen. What made you think that?”

“He was conspiring with that thing!”

“What thing?”

“The beast!”

“Sure.”

“I promise it’s true.”

“If that were true he would have fed me to the beast by now.”

“Well—”

“Shh. It’s coming. Get the trap ready. I’ll be back.” Azalea began to sneak away.

“*Please* be careful,” said Cal.

Azalea rushed through the woods to catch up with the beast, wandering quickly through the trees, bumping into rocks and tripping on roots.

She took a breath, grabbed a rock, and tossed it at the beast’s head. It hit it behind the ear.

The beast stopped and growled. Then, turning Azalea’s direction, it pounced. But Azalea dove behind a tree, the beast smashing its head into the trunk, which cracked loudly.

Azalea leapt over a rock and nearly slipped in the pine needles covering the ground. She ran as fast as she could, trying not to look back at the beast leaping furiously towards her.

When she came to the spot where she had left Callen, he was nowhere to be seen. Her heart began to race.

“Callen?” she called. “Callen, it’s coming.” She began to wonder if Callen had set this all up—to get her away so that he can leave her again. She spun around, looking for him. The beast had crashed into another tree, and in its fury, snapped the thick trunk in half.

Just as the beast was about to leap again, Azalea saw a vine lowering down in front of her. Above her head was Callen, hiding in the treetops.

“Quick!” he said, and she grabbed on, climbing the vine. The beast leapt her way, but when it landed, the ground beneath it collapsed and it tumbled into a pit.

Azalea climbed up into the tree with Callen and tried to catch her breath. They looked down and watched the blind beast scratching at the walls, trying to find its way out. It growled angrily.

“How—” she said. “How did you know that pit was there?”

“When I started rescuing people out of the Silent Woods, I made many traps like these, expecting the beast to come looking. I layered leaves and branches—enough that it could hold a few people, but weak enough to hold a large creature. I never knew if it would work though, since the beast never left the woods.”

“How did you know it was going to work this time?”

“I didn’t.”

Azalea punched his shoulder, but then she laughed. Then she shook her head.

“Why’d you have to run away, Cal?” she asked. “I missed you.”

“I didn’t want to. But I couldn’t stick around and support Father’s choices.”

“What *choices*? You keep saying that. Father wasn’t *conspiring* with the beast. He would never do that. I thought you knew that.”

“But he did.”

“Look,” he said, sighing. “The night I left, I woke up really late and couldn’t go back to sleep.”

“Well that’s perfectly normal. I don’t know *why* you were so worried.”

“No, I’m not done.”

Azalea giggled.

“Azalea, this is serious!”

“Ok, I’m listening.”

“Anyway, I couldn’t go back to sleep, and so I decided to take a walk. When I went outside, well, you know that trail right past the barn that forks left and right?”

“Yes, of course.”

“Well I decided to go right, down towards the Silent Woods.”

“Cal!”

“What?”

“We’re not supposed to go that way.”

“I know, I know. I wasn’t really thinking about it.”

Azalea raised an eyebrow.

“Ok, I was curious. I wanted to know what was so bad about the Woods and I just wanted to get a closer look.”

Azalea shook her head.

“Hey, you’re just as curious as me so don’t go blaming me. I hope I don’t need to bring up the—”

“Don’t you dare bring up the hay incident.”

“It was pretty funny, Azalea.”

“I wanted to know what it tasted like! The horses looked like they were enjoying it so much.”

“Uh huh. Exactly. And you just *had* to know.”

“Ok, ok, I get it. Keep going.”

“The thing is, when I got to the Silent Woods, father was there.”

“What?”

“Yea! He was standing right on the edge of the woods. His blue bracelets were glowing and he was lifting his arms like he was trying to give the woods a big hug.”

“What was he doing?”

“I thought maybe he was just practicing or something like that. I didn’t want him to know I had come down that path, so I hid nearby and watched. Soon enough, he lowered his arms, and creeping out of the darkness—that *thing* that’s in the pit below us! It walked right up to the edge of the woods, staring at father

with its bright bulging eyes, but it did nothing. It just looked at him. And here's the thing, father *also* did nothing. He just looked at it."

"Mmmm, Cal I think you were seeing things. It *was* pretty late at night."

"No, I wasn't! And right before my eyes, I saw father's two blue bracelets turn into four. Then he started back towards me, and the beast went back into the Woods."

"Did you talk to Father about it? Or Mother?"

"No, I just ran. I didn't pack any of my things." Callen was silent for a moment. "Azalea, it felt like everything I had known was a lie. Father was always talking to us about the Kingfisher, and the right way, and truth. But to know that he was *helping* that thing."

"I don't think he was helping it, Cal."

"How do you know?"

"Father's gotten a lot more . . . tired—since you left."

"Tired?"

"He walks around with his shoulders hunched over, he's quieter, he doesn't laugh. And it seems like he always has bags under his eyes."

"That doesn't mean that he wasn't helping it. The tiredness is probably a result of him interacting with it. Like the rain that comes when it's around. It steals people's emotions or something—takes away their need to care. That's why I ran away. I just didn't know what to do."

Azalea looked at Callen closely. Then she scooted across the branches where they were sitting and hugged him. She laid her head on his shoulder.

Suddenly they heard a snarl. Looking down, they caught a glimpse below them of the beast pulling itself out of the pit.

"Aw man, that pit took me three weeks to dig. It's supposed to work!"

The beast growled bitterly. It began striking their tree, trying to knock it down. The limbs shook. Callen and Azalea barely held on. Then the tree began to groan. It began to fall. Azalea and Callen jumped, landing heavily on the ground.

But before the beast could reach them, there was a burst of blue light and a crack appeared in the void above the beast.

Chapter 37: Journey to the Father

When Zander rose from his place on the ground, his back ached. Looking around at the dark cave, he quickly remembered his dream, and knew what he needed to do.

He stood and picked Evan up. Evan was murmuring to himself. He felt warm.

Zander carried Evan to the back of the cave, where he found a staircase leading further in. Faint sounds of water bounced up through the opening, but it was very dark.

When he reached the bottom of the staircase, the water sounds grew louder. It was a sloshing sound, bits of water being tossed about in the depths of the cave.

He stepped and almost lost his footing. The bottom of the staircase was flooded with water. Still holding Evan in his arms, he attempted to brace himself against the wall and feel how deep the water went. To his relief, he found it was not too deep, but the water rose to his knees. It was painfully cold. He grit his teeth.

Then Zander began a journey, sloshing his way in the darkness through the freezing water. His breath echoed and seemed to reverberate his thoughts back into his mind. He felt fear, like an insect, crawling over him. It was a quiet voice, unlike the mountain. But its words seeped through the silence and filled the cave's echo chambers.

Who are you to think you're worth something? It said flatly.

The darkness is growing. It's getting thicker around you, Zander.

You will fail, Zander. Brace yourself.

His heart pounded. He could barely see, but he kept moving. The voice made him want to stop, to turn back, to give up. But he reminded himself of what he had heard the fire say in his dream. *Born to protect. Born to believe. Born to be free.*

As he repeated those words, both his own stone and Evan's lit with white and purple fire. The cavern filled with bright light.

It was a good thing too.

Zander saw, only a few steps ahead of him, a deep chasm. The water washed silently off the edge, falling so far that he couldn't hear it hit the bottom.

He sucked in a breath, wobbling with dizziness, trying to maintain his balance and keep a hold of Evan. To his right he saw a dry area where the water didn't reach. And in the light he saw a doorway.

He lifted himself out of the water stream and walked to the doorway. After ascending a short staircase, the stones dimmed. The red light of the sunset filled his view.

At last, he was out of the cave. He set Evan down for a moment and tried to catch his breath. But just as he did, it began to rain. His heart jumped. He knew what the rain meant. It had happened before.

The beast was on its way.

Wearily, he stood and picked Evan up again, his legs shaking. He was breathing heavily, and his arms were beginning to fail, but there was no more time.

He passed between trees and found himself on a rough road. The road led up a hill, but he could see in the distance the silhouette of the castle of the Fourth.

His heart leapt and for a moment his energy renewed.

He trekked heavily up the hill, barely holding on to Evan.

Then a familiar voice returned.

Pitiful. . . Helping the boy you swore to kill.

He turned, sweating. From the high place on the hill, he could see Invictus in the distance. It was no longer silent.

"Be quiet," he said, turning back towards the castle.

How can I? You must know what you've done to me.

"You were quiet for a time. Stay that way."

You caused my silence when you killed my son.

Zander stopped. Tears formed in his eyes. "I didn't kill Wren."

You killed him the moment you brought him on the mission.

"That was his choice!"

You could have defended him.

"I couldn't. He defended me."

Weak. Weak. Weak.

Zander continued walking.

Running. That seems to be your norm. Fear. Cowardice.

"This isn't cowardice," Zander said fiercely. "You sent me to kill my family. How could you do that?"

Alder gave up on family long ago. Evan is no more family than the stones.

"He's family to me."

Then the rain picked up and the wind blew harder.

Then you have abandoned me as well. Let the rain shower my contempt upon you.

Zander began to cry, and the rain drenched his hair. His legs were trembling, but he kept walking, up and up the hill. There was a crack of thunder and a violent flash of light. Something broke above him, and a branch tumbled down from the trees, crashing beside him. A loose end of the branch swiped across his face and cut deep into his cheek. He fell, dropping Evan to the ground next to him, barely managing to avoid falling on top of him.

Laying on the pine needle floor, Zander's eyes fluttered. Evan was still asleep. Zander fought to stay awake.

The sun was fading and again the day was turning to night. The darkness was coming.

But Zander was asleep before the sun fully set, blood joining the rain that covered him.

Chapter 38: Broken Shackles

Farley leapt out of the crack in the air with blue fire lining the backs of his arms. His bracelets were glowing fiercely and he released bursts of light at the beast as he landed.

The beast flew back and tumbled across the forest floor. But it quickly scrambled to its feet and roared.

“Father!” cried Azalea.

Farley turned. He seemed tired. Then his eyes met with Callen’s, and they widened. “Cal?”

“Hello, father.”

Farley was silent for a moment—a silence that the beast’s roar quickly filled. Farley took a deep breath and the blue fire of his bracelets ignited all around him. In the air, a circle of light appeared that began to encapsulate the beast like a net. It thrashed, but the light coming from Farley’s bracelets held it down.

Farley was sweating. He groaned and the veins in his arms stood out. Clenching his jaw and closing his eyes, he held his hands out as the light held the beast down, but he began to tremble.

“Father, stop!” cried Azalea. “There’s nothing you can do. It’s too strong!”

“He’s just trying to use it for himself, Azalea. We need to go.”

Then Farley’s eyes opened and he looked at Callen. “Use it? I’m trying to stop it!”

“You can’t lie to me, Father. I saw you at the Woods that night. You were working with it.”

“Son, no, I was trapping it. Trapping it in the Woods so it couldn’t get out.”

“Then why isn’t it there now?”

Farley was breathing heavily. The longer he held the beast down, the more it thrashed.

“It was too powerful. I—I couldn’t stop it from—”

“From what?”

Farley's eyebrows drew together. With a great cry, he grabbed the beast with the ring of light, and threw it over the kids heads and back into the pit.

The fire around his arms dimmed. And Callen and Azalea watched as the four bracelets around his arms turned into six. Now he had three on each arm, and he seemed to slump lower.

"You kids," he said. "You need to get out of here. Go far away where it can't hurt you."

"We're not leaving," said Azalea. "Besides. You two have stuff to work out. Father, tell him you weren't working with the beast."

Farley's hands were on his knees. "Son, Azalea's right. I'm not working with it. Is that why you ran away?"

"How could I stay if you were helping that thing?"

"I was trying to stop it—"

"Stop it from hurting people by letting it stay alive in the Woods?"

"No. I was trying to stop it from getting stronger. I see now I was only letting it grow."

Now Azalea was curious. "What are you talking about?"

"I know I've been away a lot. I was trying to find out more about it. I was studying it, not working with it."

"That's just as bad," said Callen.

"I was—" said Farley, and he paused. "I was terrified."

Callen's eyes flickered. "Terrified?"

"I should have told you two. But soon before you saw me . . . that night, the Kingfisher came to me."

"The Kingfisher?" said both of the kids.

"He told me to confront the beast, and to bring it to King Alder."

"Why didn't you?"

"Have you ever heard the legend of the Shadow-Blank?"

Callen and Azalea looked at each other. They heard the beast growling in the pit.

“It’s very real. But it’s not *one thing*. The Shadow-Blank is one great creature formed from four shadow beasts—prophesied to rain destruction on the world. If it were to come together . . . I don’t know what I’d do. This beast is just one piece of the Shadow-Blank. The Kingfisher told me the others are forming. I thought I could stop it from happening.”

“But King Alder can? Is that why the Kingfisher told you to bring it to him?”

“The beast only grows stronger in the presence of the King.”

“So—you weren’t working with the beast?” said Callen. He looked pale.

“No, son,” Farley said, and he scratched his beard. He looked distraught. “But I wasn’t obeying the Kingfisher either. I thought I could hide the beast from the world. Instead, it hurt you both, and created distance in our family.”

“Father, I’ve been pulling people out of the Silent Woods. Now they’re all gone. The beast got to them.”

Farley lowered his head. “I’m sorry.”

For a moment they were all silent. Azalea held her breath. Then Callen walked up to Farley, who lifted his head wearily. The bracelets around his arms seemed heavy. Farley’s arms hung low.

Then Callen hugged him. Tears welled in Farley’s eyes. “Father, you taught me that the order of the Kingfisher brings life and peace. You told me story after story of times the Kingfisher rescued you when you felt like everything was hopeless. Remember those times. This is no different. Those rings you wear don’t have to burden you. Look to the light.”

Just as Callen spoke, there was a trill, and the Kingfisher flew over their heads. Farley took a deep breath, then looked Callen in the eyes. “I’m proud of you, son. Will you help me complete the mission the Kingfisher gave me?”

Callen nodded, tears running down his cheeks. Then Callen and Azalea watched as their father stood. He looked taller than before, and the rings seemed like they no longer weighed him down.

Then the rings began to glow, bright and warm. They spun on his arms, blue sparks leaping joyfully around them. Flying off his arms, they broke in the

air, expanding and reshaping themselves. They drew lines around Farley, circling his arms, waist, and legs. Callen and Azalea's eyes widened. He was a knight, wearing armor made of blue light that shone and lit the growing darkness.

Chapter 39: The Man with Eyes like Stars

Zander opened his eyes and winced at the pain in his cheek. He put his fingers to his cheek. There was a long cut from his nose to his jaw. His eyes teared up in pain.

By his face, there was a pool. Sitting up exhaustedly, he looked in and saw himself and Evan laying in the rain in the woods.

He pinched his arm. He needed to wake up. He couldn't dream now. Around him, there was nothing but fields of dead grass and big black clouds.

Kneeling nearby was Zeito, surrounded with gold light, hair hanging to the ground.

"Zander," he said weakly. "What's going on? I can't hold your dream forever if it keeps changing. Whose dream did you enter?"

"I didn't do this."

Then the clouds spun and swirled down, shadows collecting together.

The clouds turned solid. Standing in the field with a massive spear in its hand was a great wolf-like creature whose eyes were scarred shut. It snarled and its teeth showed.

My eyes for your life, it said, mouth unmoving. *Now I hunt two.*

Zander felt his mouth go dry.

Then Zeito looked up, breathing heavily. "You have no authority here," he said. "His dreams belong to the Kingfisher." Zeito burst with gold light and the beast screeched.

Lightning struck a thousand times in the clouds above him. The beast dissolved back into clouds and joined the black cloud in the sky.

Then Zander woke, coughing, with his face in the mud and cool rain streaming down his face.

Zander pushed against the forest floor, his arms shaking, and he lifted himself up. He stood shakily, but he summoned up all the strength he could and lifted Evan once again.

He strode heavily, each step painful and strained. Growling echoed all among the trees. Zander wanted to look all around him, but he was too tired.

Weak, said the mountain from behind him. *Turn back now and I won't think you any less than you already are.*

"I can't," said Zander.

Why? Because of him? It's pointless now. You'll die too.

"I'd rather protect him and die," mumbled Zander, "than kill others and live."

As he said this, the shadow beast appeared, stalking out of the woods in front of him. Zander paused and held his breath. His arms were shaking. He was barely keeping hold of Evan.

Mmm. I can smell you, prey, it said. *You're afraid.*

Zander took a deep breath. The beast was yards ahead of him, searching, eyeless. He heard its feet padding towards him. Closer and closer it came, until at last it stood before him. Zander's eyes were heavy. He was so exhausted. He could only stand there, holding Evan, thinking of the mountain behind him, glaring down at him.

He braced himself for the beast's attack. But it just stood there, mere feet ahead of him. Then it roared and began thrashing its head back and forth, but it came no closer.

In the midst of the rain and the roaring of the beast, there was a gentle chirp. Zander looked down. A blue bird with fire on its chest stood on the ground in between him and the beast. The beast thrashed even more. It began jumping and clawing, trying to push itself forward, but something held it back.

The bird stared at Zander. Its eyes were deep, strong, and knowing. It captivated Zander, and he forgot the beast was there. He forgot the pain in his arms and legs. He forgot the scar on his face. And he even forgot the rain.

Everything silenced around him. The beast kept thrashing its huge black head but made no noise.

For a moment, the darkness of the forest around him pulsed, but the bird's eyes began to glow. Stars appeared around the bird and floated around it.

Then there was a burst of color and light. The bird floated up in the air and began to transform. The light danced around Zander, orbiting him in celebration of the bird's change. Zander found Evan was gone.

The bird was now a man, barefoot, with eyes shimmering so brightly that they overpowered the stars. In those eyes, Zander saw that he knew all his memories, all his longings, all his joys and sorrows. Zander began to cry.

The man approached him silently and put his hand on Zander's face. He gently drew his finger along the line of Zander's cut, which disappeared as it moved.

"Beloved son, would you like to be healed?"

"I didn't mean for my brother to die."

"I know," said the Kingfisher, whose eyes filled with tears.

"Please," said Zander. "I'm so tired."

The Kingfisher smiled and put his hands on Zander's shoulders. Then he placed a hand on his heart. Zander felt heat like fire burning within his hand.

"You are dearly loved," said the man with eyes like stars. "Follow me."

Zander nodded, and wept.

The Kingfisher touched his forehead, and Zander felt a shift in the atmosphere around him. He looked around and found himself in the field of his dreams, with the tall dancing grass and the pine trees that hugged the sky. The Kingfisher was walking now, towards the great tree in the center of the field, burning with a thousand white fires.

Zander followed.

He felt his muscles strengthen and the breath return to his lungs. His eyesight sharpened and heat burned in his mind and heart.

The man with shimmering eyes reached up from beneath the tree and took in his hand some of the white fire from the tree. He turned and said, "Show me the stone I gave you."

Zander pulled out the stone. The man placed the fire on the stone and held Zander's hand between his.

“This way,” he said, with a bright smile. He began to walk and as Zander followed this time, the dream shifted and spun so that they found themselves in front of Zeito, kneeling with his head almost to the ground, sweating and breathing raspily.

The man walked up to Zeito, gleaming with gold light, and lifted his head.

“Well done,” he said.

“M-master,” said Zeito, eyes growing wide.

“You can let go now,” said the man, and he laughed. The laughter reverberated through the woods.

Zeito took the Kingfisher’s hand and kissed it. “What will you have me do now?”

“Rest,” he said. “It’s time to wake Evan up.”

Evan was still frozen before the beast, with the sword made of purple light raised and gleaming. He was looking up into the trees.

The Kingfisher passed through the beast as if it didn’t exist. He put his hands on Evan’s cheeks and whispered to him. Zander watched as his joints broke from their frozen place in time. Evan’s eyes grew bright and big at the sight of the glowing man before him, but he didn’t look surprised.

“Thank you,” he said simply.

The Kingfisher looked to Zander, then back at Evan. “The power I’ve given both of you does not work in isolation. Remember me.”

Light poured out of the Kingfisher like water, filling the dream until Zander and Evan woke together to find the beast roaring and a sword-wielding King standing over them.

Chapter 40: The Tears of King Alder

“Father?” cried Evan. The King stood firm before him, holding a sword in his right hand and a torch in his left.

“Evan,” he said, worry in his eyes. “I won’t let it hurt you.” The beast was quieter than before. It had stopped thrashing its head and stayed low to the ground. Though its eyes were scarred shut, it seemed to be staring at the King.

The King began swiping the torch back and forth. “Get back!”

The beast inched back, but it didn’t seem frightened in the slightest. King Alder continued, and struck out with his sword. It passed through the beast like air, and it stayed unaffected.

“Father be careful!” Evan said. The King was trembling. And as the King trembled more and more, the beast began to rise. It stood on its hind legs, snarling, and mist spilled out of it. The mist joined together and formed a spear in its hand. It was twice Alder’s size and made him look very small.

Feed me, Master, before I join my brethren.

“I won’t!” cried Alder. “You can’t have any more of me!”

“Master?” said Zander.

Alder looked back at Evan. “I’m sorry, son, I—”

Yes. Feed me, Master. Feed Kedha. Then Afenu will rise, and the Shadow-Blank will bring silence.

“The Shadow-Blank?” asked Evan. “But Zeito told me it didn’t exist. What’s going on, Father?”

Alder swiped the torch again at the beast. It didn’t flinch.

“I—I didn’t mean to do it, son.” The beast began to laugh. The laughter was brittle and black. It stayed in their minds, for the monster only showed its fangs.

Yesss tell him. Tell him what you have done.

Alder exhaled sharply. His lips were chapped. Then he took a defeated breath. “Son, this is my creation. I made the shadow beast.”

Evan said nothing. He felt sick inside. The monster grew. Alder had turned his eyes to the growing beast. He stared at it.

“I didn’t mean to, Evan. I’m sorry. I didn’t want you to know. I’ve fallen so far from who I used to be. I’m not the father you once knew.”

Then there came a sudden warmth amid the cold wind. And a green glow. Evan looked to Zander. He was holding a small emerald ring in his hand, peering at it curiously.

“It just started glowing in my bag,” he said.

“That’s my mother’s ring,” Evan said. “How did you get it?”

“Callen gave it to me.”

Evan took the ring from Zander and approached his father, who was still gazing at the beast. The shadows around the creature swirled around it, drawing in power.

“Father, look,” Evan said. “Mother’s ring.”

King Alder didn’t look.

“Father, stop looking at it. You’re giving it power. Fear and shame fuels it. You have to turn your eyes to something else. Look at this. Look at this beautiful thing Mother made.”

King Alder gazed unblinking at the beast, but his brows furrowed together and tears fell from his eyes.

“I don’t know if I can,” he said, his voice catching in his throat.

Evan took his father’s hand and placed the glowing green ring his his palm.

“Then feel how warm it is.”

At the touch of Alder’s hand, the ring lit with green flame. The flame spread and gently wrapped his arm. Then Evan watched his father close his eyes. His face relaxed.

Finally, he turned his gaze from the beast and looked at the ring in his hand. Then he wept. The tears fell into his hand, the flame of the ring absorbing them. And in the darkness, wildflowers sprouted around King Alder’s feet.

The beast snarled. It showed its fangs, and for a second, Alder winced. Evan couldn’t hear it talking anymore—it seemed to have focused its messages on the King.

“You are not *me*,” said King Alder quietly. His jaw was trembling, but he kept his eyes on the ring. The green flames of the ring grew and spread around him. But the beast began to fight back. It roared.

Then Evan looked down. His stone began to glow too, purple light mingling with the intense green light. And behind him, there was a white light.

“Evan,” said Zander. “I think we need to use our stones now—together.”

Evan nodded and they held their stones tightly. Purple and white flames were born and danced around them. Closing his eyes, Evan imagined the man from his dreams—the man with eyes like stars. He felt something forming in his hand. The fire collected itself and turned into a sword.

Almost on instinct, Evan raised the sword in his hand and Zander raised his stone. Light burst in the woods, colors flying through the air. The beast howled and roared. It began thrashing its head in pain. Though blind, it could see the light. It snapped at the rivers of color pouring around it.

Enraged, it raised its giant spear to strike at Alder.

But the colors swirled together, creating an orb of light that encircled the beast. It cried out in pain. Surrounding the beast, the orb of purple, white, and green began to sink, pulling the beast down and holding it against the ground.

It thrashed under the orb, more furious than ever. Evan and Zander strained to keep it down. Then the beast lifted the spear, still in its hand, and jabbed upward at the orb. It thrust the spear up over and over. Finally the orb broke and the pulse of power knocked Evan and Zander back.

The beast grew even larger and its fur grew longer. It stretched its arms and opened its jaw wide. King Alder still stood with his back to the beast, gazing at the ring.

Kedha, Afenu, Silence! It called, summoning the power of the night.
Kedha, Afenu, Silence!

Chapter 41: The Order of the Kingfisher

Thick mist poured out of the beast. It roared and arched its back, preparing to strike. Pulling back its bulging arms, it gripped the spear and struck.

But before the spear could reach Alder, a massive doorway appeared in the air above them, lined with bright blue fire.

Farley came flipping out of the opening, brandishing a double-bladed blue sword made of fire, and the brightest armor Evan had ever seen. With mighty force, Farley struck the spear, cutting it in half.

Evan gasped. This was not the same man he knew before. He was strong and proud, full of joy, and his bracelets were gone.

Callen and Azalea followed their father through the portal. They rushed to Evan and Zander and helped them up.

Then Farley joined the boys and lifted his sword. His eyes were full of radiant blue fire. Again they created an orb of light—this one made of purple, white, and blue light. It quickly surrounded the reeling beast and created a dome around it.

Roaring, the beast trembled at the light surrounding it. It clawed at the dome surrounding it, but it couldn't break through. The heat burned it, and it pulled back.

King Alder was still gazing at the green ring. "I miss you, my love. Forgive me."

As he said this, the wildflowers grew around his feet and vines sprouted from the ground, gently curling around the King in a soft embrace.

Then the King stood to his full height, his eyes lit with passion, and for the first time in a very long time, Evan saw his father once again. His *father*, King Alder of the Fourth Quadrant.

The King held the ring up to join Evan, Zander, and Farley. The ring shone brilliantly. Saplings, vines, flowers and ferns began to sprout all around the area, pine trees bending above him, dancing. Then even the stones began to roll

around them. The rocks and gravel rolled all around and gathered at the beast's ankles. It tried to fight against them, but it couldn't escape the orb of light.

Suddenly, there was a bright flash of light and a wave of gold fire. Zeito himself appeared close by the orb, his cloak lined with light, his eyes bright and ablaze.

The rocks spiraled up the length of the beast, up its legs, around its tail and waist, and up its torso. It kicked its legs and thrashed its head to throw the rocks off. Zeito approached the dome, and as the rocks gathered on the beast, he bent the fire close to the rocks, melting them together, trapping the beast's legs in stone.

The rocks continued curling up the beast's neck, and Zeito filled the cracks with fire. At last, it let out a final roar, which was stifled by the stone enclosing it.

When the light finally dimmed and the fire cooled, all that was left was a statue of the blinded beast, roaring into the night.

Chapter 42: Clear Eyes and New Beginnings

As the atmosphere settled, everyone stared at the statue. The beast, once ambiguous, always moving, had been reduced to a gray outline of itself.

King Alder turned to Evan. Evan looked at his eyes and his heart swelled. His father's eyes seemed clear and pure, as if they had been washed free of a murky veil. Now they were no longer hopeless. Just a little while ago, Evan looked into the waters of those eyes and saw an abyss, unfeeling, unfathomable. Now there were mountains of hope rising in his eyes, breaking the surface of the waters and lifting themselves to touch the sky.

When Alder looked at Evan, glancing away from Zander, his eyes were glad. They *saw* Evan and they were not disappointed. They were proud. Old smile wrinkles from long ago appeared around his eyes, and Evan felt a catch in his throat. He jumped at his father and wrapped his arms around him. King Alder laughed and the pine trees above him swayed happily.

"Thank you," he said, and embraced his son. Then he lifted his gaze and looked at Farley. His armor had faded away, replaced by a belt studded with sapphire gems.

"You should have this," he said. He held out the emerald ring.

Farley shook his head. "My sister would want you to keep it. Pass it on to someone who will wield it truthfully."

Evan was stunned. "My mother? Your sister?" Then he looked to Callen and Azalea. Callen shrugged, just as surprised.

King Alder smiled. "Yes. And I think, then, this belongs to you." He walked up to Callen and Azalea. Reaching out, he placed the ring in Azalea's hand. "Your family's ring will guide you. Soon you will know your role under the Order of the Kingfisher."

Callen looked confused but he said nothing. Alder noticed his furrowed brow. "There is much left for you to do. The Kingfisher has big plans for you."

At last he turned to Zander, who stood patiently, wearily, with the smooth stone in his hand.

“Excuse me, your majesty,” he said. “But my father sent me to kill your son. Why would he do that?”

Alder exhaled slowly. Then Zeito approached. “Because he was afraid,” said the old man. “He wanted to prevent the prophecy from coming true.”

“But what did it mean?”

“He was afraid that Evan would accept the mission given to him. The prophecy foretold that if Evan received his stone, then madness would come upon him and his power would be taken away.”

“My stone?”

“What is his stone, Zeito?” asked Farley. “We asked Crowler, but he said it was ancient. He couldn’t tell. I’ve never seen him so amazed.”

“I don’t know,” he said. “But it seems that the entirety of the Kingfisher’s plan hinges around those stones—both Evan’s and Zander’s.”

“Mine too?” asked Zander.

“Yes. Which means the prophecy is fulfilled.”

“Then is Darian . . .” began King Alder.

“Mad? Yes. In the least metaphorical sense.”

Zander took a deep breath.

“Friends,” said Zeito slowly. “The Kingfisher calls. The battle doesn’t end with this beast. The Shadow-Blank is rising, and Afenu, its master, is stirring up a war.”

“A war? My father is involved, isn’t he?”

“Yes, Zander. It’s time to confront Darian the Hungry.”

The company gathered together, and faced the horizon. From up on the hill, they could see the Nebo Kalim, and deadly Invictus with its powerful gaze. None of them knew what would come of the days ahead, but as the Order of the Kingfisher, they stood tall and proud, listening to the bright trilling in the distance. It was time to leave the Fourth Quadrant, face Kings, and battle shadows. It was time to follow the Kingfisher, purely and wholeheartedly, as Mountains in the Deep.

